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June 17, 1879.

Vol. IV.

Single
Number.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

No. 99.

THE TIGER OF TAOS; or, WILD KATE, DANDY ROCK'S ANGEL.

BY GEORGE WALDO BROWNE,

Author of "Dandy Rock," "The Dread Rider," etc., etc.



PLUNGING HIS SPURS INTO THE FIERY ANIMAL'S FLANKS, THEY DASHED OUT OF THE VALLEY AT A MAD GALLOP.

The Tiger of Taos;

OR,
Wild Kate, Dandy Rock's Angel.

BY GEORGE WALDO BROWNE,
AUTHOR OF "DANDY ROCK," "THE DREAD RIDER," ETC.

CHAPTER I. THE STORM COMPACT.

NIGHT, darkness, gloom and storm. The sun had long since sunk from sight behind great, inky-black clouds, which rapidly rising on the horizon soon shrouded the western sky, shutting out from mortal view alike, the earth below and the expanse above, veiling the world, in a darkness so intense that the lurid and startling gleams of forked lightning streaming across the Chimerian space seemed a relief, and binding all Nature in a stillness unbroken, save by the thundering of electricity's artillery. Great drops of rain had already begun to fall, and soon the flood-gate of the elements would be opened. The insects of the earth, the beasts of the forest, and the fowls of the air had all alike sought hasty shelter from the deluge of the oncoming tempest.

Away upon the south-west border of the Lone Star State, over that wild, barren, broken region known as the "Red Lands of Old Shelby," hangs the storm-cloud, and sways the spell we have told. Time: a summer's night, 1840.

In the face of the impenetrable blackness, in spite of the fierce battling of the hurricane, and in defiance of the dangers threatening his path, guided solely on his course by the blinding flashes of lightning, a solitary man was slowly and laboriously working his way along through the wildest of that wild tract of Texas, nearing the range of the "Black Gulch"—that dreaded and gloom-haunted spot where even in the hours of light but few have cared to go, and where the midday sun has never shone.

Surely it must be business of more than common moment to call a man abroad in such a place and night as this.

"Ha!" exclaimed the lone traveler, as at that moment a bolt of lightning coming nearer than any of its predecessors, shivered to atoms a huge tree scarcely two rods distant, and came near striking him senseless.

"This is a fearful—!" Further utterance was checked by a deafening, rumbling crash, which seemed to rend heaven and earth asunder.

With a shudder, the man, who appeared in the transitory gleam of dazzling light with a stalwart frame, long, heavy, and tawny beard and sinister countenance, folded his cloak closer around his broad shoulders, and drew his slouched felt hat down over his evil eyes, as if to shut out his situation.

Again the forked tongues of electric fire lit up for an instant the shadowed scene; and again the roll and roar of thunder made the hills and valleys tremble. Then, a moment's lull, and the rain poured down in torrents.

Groping his way forward, perhaps a rod further, the next flash of light disclosed to the anxious gaze of the night wanderer what seemed the entrance to a cavern.

"Thank God! I've got hyar at last." Then, giving a low whistle, which was instantly answered from within, he quickly entered the dark recess.

"Hello, Mexiker! ye hyar?"

"Capita!" exclaimed a low, whini g voice from the darkness. "You are late."

"Wal! I reckon ye ken jess thank yer lucky stars thet I'm hyar at all. It am a tough night, an' in this cussid kentry I kem nigh losin' my way. But what's she wo d?"

"Curmba! Curses upon the Americano! He shall die, die!"

"Wal, I must say ye don't entertain a very high respect fer ther feller. What's the trouble? Es we ar' in fer mutual benefit, s'pose ye tell how ye kem to hate him so."

"Hate! that is no word for it! I have sworn that he shall die, and die like a dog he shall! You have asked my reasons. A few years ago a friend, named Pedro Correy, and myself were in Santa Fe, when I made the acquaintance of Donna Luella Salaza, and soon she would have been mine. Then came this long-haired dog of an Americano, and stole her from me. At a fandango, soon after, backed by a dozen friends, I tried to take her from him; but he and a mountaineer who sided with him fought like fools! *Falame Dies!* Their knives were long, and they took every advantage. Four of my party were killed, and my foe escaped, taking her with him. For two years Pedro and myself hunted him; then my friend was shot, and alone I continued the work. Since then I have run the wolf to his hole, but he seems to have a charmed life. Twice has he been in my power and escaped."

"But it won't b so always. He has killed Pedro and my brother, Juan; he still has her, and thinks I am dead. But, in spite of him, San Mullre still lives, and now, aided by you and your thirty gallant followers, he will rid the world of the long-haired wolf, or blood shall run in Shelby county as free as water."

"Gi'n us yer paw, old Mexiker; ye ar' jess my stamp. I reckon we ken hitch."

"Will you help me?" asked the other, eagerly.

"Uv-course, ef ye'll chip in."

"What do you want?"

"Wal, es ye hev bin pretty free with me, I reckon I follow suit. Ye see, mine is an old grudge same es yourn. But I work different, 'cording ter my nater,

ye know. In the first place, 'bout the gal uv Colonel Raymun. Onc't he crossed my path. Menny's the yur I've waited ter git even with him. He lured the mother frum me, an' now I'll take the child frum him. Understand? She must and shall be mine. In the second place, one yur ago, under Captain Wayne, our band numbered twenty-eight as true hearts es ever beat. But c yotes in human garb crossed our trail. The leader wur a one-legged Northerner, and the other two—wal, they ar' spotted. Through them, sixteen of the boys went under. Mon'z them the cap'en an' my brother, Big Hank Webber, es they called him at the settlement. The cap'en was an old coon on ther war-path, but Old One-Leg, the Dead Duelist an' his chums war too much fer us, an' we war te-totally bu'sted. But now I've got back so to begin ag'in. I tell ye I owe Chesterville a blow which I am bound shall wipe her out. Your man is one uv them, an' you ar' right 'bout j'ining teams."

"When are you ready?" asked the other.

"Ha—ha—ha!" laughed the one with the tawny beard; "ye needn't ask when Joe Corinth will be ready. He is like the fox. Listen! In the employ of Col. Raymun—a couple of his most trusted peons!—ar' two of my men upon whom I can depend. Yesterday, in company with them, Miss Raymun went to visit a relative across West-Chester Plain. To-morrow she will return, an' instructed from me, her guides will lead her into a trap I have set, an' then—wal, don't ye see it'll only be fun?"

"Good!" chuckled the Mexican, "you cannot fail!"

"Right! Now jess help me through with my biz, an' I'll sw'ar thet Dandy Rock Randel shall die afore the third sun shall set, without ye liftin' yer hand."

"Dios! Oh, my!" exclaimed the astonished avenger.

"I know jess the hoss fer the job, an' it'll be fun fer him. Black Line had ruther 'ring the bowie' then eat fat buffler. He'll do the work, while we do the planning, ye know. Come, gi'n us another grip, old pard; I reckon we'll stan' or fall together. Wagh!"

"Agreed."

In the darkness of the low-walled cave, like panthers crouching in their holes, the bloodthirsty plotters sealed their fearful compact in the friendly grasp of the hand. Outside the elements were raging at their height.

Half an hour later the tempest had spent its fury; the storm-cloud had been swept aside. High in the arched canopy above, set in a jewel of myriad stars, fair Luna smiled down from her lofty domain, with a beaming countenance upon the earth in tranquil repose.

CHAPTER II. A LIFE AT STAKE.

THE day following the night of our last chapter was just drawing to a close, when the figure of a man was to be seen standing at the foot of the bluff overhanging the Rio Burte valley. He had apparently just arisen to his feet, and with a sluggish yawn drew his form to its full height, as he glanced out upon the prairie, which stretched away from his feet mile upon mile as far as the human vision could extend, and leagues beyond. Near, half-hidden by the tangled underbrush, a clean-limbed, strong-built, dark-sorrel horse, all saddled and bridled, clipped the leaves from the stunted growth while satisfying the cravings of his rapacious appetite. Evidently they were master and servant.

Young in years—not more than one or two and twenty—with a supple, athletic frame, regular, classical features, and a self-reliant mien, the stranger's physique was one to win admiration and respect; and its beauty was only enhanced by the full suit of beaded and fringed buckskin in which he was clad; nor did the bronzed hue of his skin, which told of long and continual exposure to the rays of a hot Texas sun, and perfect health, detract a single grain from the charm of his countenance. He held in his hands at the time, a glistening, silver-mounted, double-barreled rifle, and from his belt were shown the butts of a pair of heavy revolvers, and the haft of a bowie.

"By Jove, Clip!" he said, addressing his steed, "if we are going to South-west Bend to-night, it is time we were moving. Ha!"

The last expression of the speaker was caused by the sudden appearance of an object on the plain, coming up in the wake of the setting sun.

"It is a horseman—no, woman," he exclaimed, in astonishment, after a moment, as, shading his eyes with his hand, he watched the nearing figure coming swiftly over the level expanse; "and, good heavens! she is pursued!"

True enough, a dozen other forms had come into sight, and seemed joined in a chase against the foremost rider, while she was rushing on in a stern race for life.

Quickly darting up the bluff our acquaintance soon reached its top, when a full view of the tract known as West-Chester Plain was had. A single glance told him his worst fears were realized. The fugitive was a woman, as he then plainly saw; and in frantic terror she was fleeing from a dozen or more of mounted men, who were riding like the hurricane, and unless by some unlooked for intervention she must soon be overtaken. Her course seemed to be for the valley at his feet. In fact, her pursuers had so managed to cut off all other retreat that she could not avoid her present direction; but he instantly saw that once in the valley she could not escape inevitable capture, without the aid of friends.

Uneasily he watched the race. Faster and faster the horsemen were gaining on their victim. Her steed, flecked with foam and dappled with blood, was fast failing. Soon she would be in their clutches.

He saw, even in the distance, that she was young and beautiful, and that her enemies were coarse, fierce-looking desperadoes. His fingers grasped his rifle nervously, still he seemed powerless to help her. If she could but reach the valley he would risk his life—ay, sacrifice it, if necessary, to save her. But on the plain—her doom was sealed!

Like one whose last hope had long since deserted her, the flying maiden still urged on her tired horse, urged him on to gain the valley, though she could not help knowing that at the most she was only deferring the fateful moment. With wild shouts and cries of exultation the fiendish horde galloped on in mad pursuit, gaining two rods for every three they made.

On swept the heroic girl rapidly nearing the growth; a moment and she would be in the valley. But suddenly her horse reeled, and staggered blindly to and fro! His work was over; his life—race was run! The desperadoes saw it; and with yells of savage delight rushed to the spot to finish their work. But, thank God! her faithful animal rallied; he shot forward into the valley—into the ravine; then suddenly, he again stopped! gave a low whinny—a gasping throe, and fell to the earth in a heap!

Dextrously freeing her skirts, the gallant rider sprung to the ground unhurt, and turned to face her foes.

With a wild shout of encouragement the man on the bluff dashed down its precipitous side, regardless of what the consequences might be, and in an instant he had cleared its descent, made the bottom, and reached the defenseless fugitive. Then, turning quickly upon the approaching horsemen, he leveled his gun upon the foremost, and in clear, ringing tones commanded them to stop.

Surprised, startled, baffled, the ruffian band with one accord impetuously drew rein; and for a moment they were held at odds by the stranger's cool, determined bravery, and the ominous muzzle of his rifle.

CHAPTER III. BETWEEN TWO FIRES!

LIKE men facing death the mad desperadoes stood at bay. For a moment following the daring stranger's threatening demand, not a word was spoken, not a move was made.

Suddenly the leader, a burly-framed, coarse-featured, tawny-bearded miscreant, exclaimed in a deep, harsh tone:

"Dog of a stripling! what do you mean? Stand aside, or we will make you food for the vultures!"

"If you or your men move a hand or foot, I will put a bullet through your heart, as true as there is a God in heaven!" came the reply, in stern, unmistakable accent.

The other saw his disadvantage, and fairly trembled with rage. What mattered it at the time if they were twelve to one? a single hostile move, and his life would be the forfeit.

"Fool! what do you mean?" he cried. "What business have ye meddlin' with my affairs? Again I say go your way, or the worst will be upon yer own head."

"What business have I meddlin' with your affairs?" repeated the other, contemptuously; "and when 'your affairs' is to make war upon defenseless ladies! Is it not enough when a woman is in peril at the hands of such as you to bring every honest man to the rescue?"

Seeing that threats were of no avail with his enemy, the ruffian choked back his rage as much as possible, and in as pleasant a tone as he could command, said:

"Eg yer pardon fer my hasty words, but I seek no quarrel with ye; an' 'pon my honor take yerself off an' ye shall not be harmed. The gal is nothin' to ye, an' sides ye can't do her enny good."

The pearly-whitened teeth of the other gleamed for an instant from beneath his brown mustache as his thin lips parted in a scornful smile.

"How are you going to help yourself if I refuse? You are in my power, and I intend to keep you there." But for the life of him he could not tell how to act, or how it was all going to end.

"Ye shall hev jess three minnits ter mount yer hoss an' make tracks in," continued the desperate wretch, without heeding the interruption, trying to appear calm in spite of his nervousness. "Ef ye ain't a goner then, we'll make daylight shine through yer brain-pan! D'ye hyar, boys! though he throws me cold!"

Without flinching, the gallant stranger never for a moment allowed his eyes to leave the desperado, and his fingers clutched his rifle nervously. His foe saw it, and trembled like an aspen, notwithstanding his attempted intimidation.

"Kind sir," said a low, musical voice by the youth's side, "I thank you a thousand times for your manly attempt to serve me, but go while you can, and leave me to my fate. You are risking your life for nothing, as you cannot save me. Again I thank you for your unselfish bravery, but flee while you may, and God grant that alone you may escape!"

"Nay, fair lady, I did not attempt your rescue to act the coward now. Cheer up!" he added, in an undertone; "we will escape the villains yet."

Then, in answer to a shrill whistle, his trained horse came dashing up to the place. Oh, how the bandit chief wished that the cool, determined rifleman, would, if only for an instant, turn his eagle eyes away from his person; but as a tiger watches its prey, the calm stranger never for a moment relaxed his vigilance.

"Mount my horse, please, and away as you value your life. I will cover your retreat, and the first move that is made by these men will sign the death-warrant of their chief."

The last was spoken in a clear, distinct tone, plainly heard by all.

The fugitive girl was about to obey, when she saw half a dozen persons coming up the ravine at a full run. The gang in front saw them at the same time, and the air rung with their shouts of triumph. Success was coming to them.

"We are lost!" she cried; "they are coming from the rear!"

The stranger realized their situation in an instant, though his eye never left his foe in front.

"Up! and ride for your life! Pass to the right of these ahead. While I hold in my hands the fate of their leader, you will not be harmed."

Wild yells from the rear nerved the brave maiden to action again. In a moment she had mounted her deliverer's horse, and with one longing glance toward her savior she urged the fleet-footed steed forward, passing within three rods of her baffled assailants as she dashed out of the valley and down the border of the plain.

Furious shouts and random shots were hurled from the party below.

"Let her go!" fairly shrieked the maddened chieftain, as he saw the peril of his situation, "but don't let him escape!"

The crisis followed.

A volley of bullets whistled around the daring man's head. Then, as he heard the fierce horde rushing upon him from behind, and saw those in front prepare for an onset, he attempted to discharge his rifle at their captain, when to his surprise it missed fire! With triumphant yells the bloodthirsty ruffians threw themselves upon him, expecting an easy victory. But with what seemed a desperation akin to madness, he rushed forward, and throwing aside his rifle drew his revolvers, emptying chamber after chamber into their midst with fatal certainty.

Those mounted were the first to reach him. The others had all spent their fire-arms without effect, and a few were still a few rods distant. But these had mostly reserved their fire, and he seemed like rushing to certain destruction, when, suddenly, their cries of exultation were followed by yells of consternation, for as the foremost horseman reached him, with the agility of a panther he sprang upon the steed's back, and ere the startled rider could comprehend the movement, he was seized around the waist in a vise-like gripe, pinioning his arms to his side, while his captor clutched with his other hand the bridle-rein, and plunging his spurs into the fiery animal's flanks, they dashed out of the valley at a mad gallop.

Random shots were sent after the flying couple; but for their companion's sake none cared or dared to risk a close aim, and the dare-devil stranger was soon safe beyond their range. Then, without checking his speed, he raised the other from his stirrups and allowed him to fall to the earth, being careful to retain his rifle.

The next instant he seated himself in the saddle; and with one farewell, mocking wave of his hand, he speedily left his discomfited and baffled foes far behind.

CHAPTER IV. WHO WAS HE?

As the last rays of the departing sun were dying out on the western horizon, the intrepid youth drew rein under a *motte* of timber, half a league to the south of the scene last described, where in the distance he had seen his fair charge in waiting.

"Oh, kind sir, you cannot tell how thankful I am to know you have escaped those dreadful men. What a risk you ran, and all for my sake! How can I ever repay you the debt of gratitude, for you have saved me from a horrible fate!"

From the peculiar circumstances of his situation, the young man had had only a hasty and imperfect glance of her for whom he had dared and done so much. He had seen that she was young, and felt that she was fair, but he was wholly unprepared for the beautiful vision which met his gaze. Never, it seemed had he beheld so lovely a being.

A graceful, sylph-like form slightly above medium height; pure, blonde complexion glowing with the bloom of the peach; regular, clearly-defined features, surmounted with a fine intellectual forehead; two lines of pearly-white teeth glistening from between a pair of coral-tinted lips; while, half-hidden behind long, drooping lashes, roguish, merry blue eyes of bewitching brilliancy added their fascinating power—all seeming to vie with a genial, self-confident, modest deportment, and radiant, beaming countenance to unite in completing her glorious and charming beauty.

As rude and ungently as it was, for a moment he gazed upon her in silence, before he could throw off the spell her presence had wrought, and control himself enough to speak. Unconsciously, she had created such a sensation in his heart as might never be effaced. But abashed and confused at his awkward position, he hastened to stammer:

"Nay, nay, lady! I should have been less than a brute had I not served you; and I ask for no greater offering than to know that you are thankful I escaped."

It was not so much the words as the impetuous, earnest tone in which they were spoken that caused the blush which suffused her countenance, as she quickly replied:

"You underrate your services I am afraid, but—oh, you are hurt!" she exclaimed, as she saw the blood trickling from a wound on his forehead.

"'Tis nothing," he answered; "only a scratch. But as you seem to be alone, I hope I can continue to be of assistance."

"Again I must thank you, but feel as if it was asking too much. Your course may lie in an opposite direction from mine; and besides, I think I can resume my journey home, without fearing molestation

again. My faithful peons, poor fellows! I am afraid have been killed by the outlaws."

"Beg pardon," the other said, "but I do not consider it safe for you to keep on alone. The desperadoes are only baffled not defeated, and may even now be preparing for another attack. Still, excuse me, I have no desire to needlessly excite your fears; but, with your permission, I shall be only too glad to have the privilege of acting the part of protector to you."

"Thanks, oh, thanks! I am indeed helpless! Were it not for you—oh, I shudder, as I think of the horrible fate which must have been mine! I cannot, cannot sufficiently reward you, but papa—"

Here, as the speaker's eyes caught the other's, she suddenly broke down; and with a tell-tale blush, her gaze wandered off toward the setting sun.

"Rest assured," he hastened to reply, "with your favor, I shall consider myself the most fortunate person in all Texas."

Again he spoke in that same tone, which so thrilled her being.

"If I may be so bold, I would ask your destination; perhaps we ought to be moving, as it will soon be night."

"I am returning, from visiting a relative, to my home in Chesterville; and, as you say, we should be starting, for it is a long ride. But," she continued, almost anxiously, "are you quite sure it is not going to take you far from your way?"

"I am only an aimless wanderer, and it matters not whither I turn or go," he answered, slowly, with a tremor; "though, were it different, I would not hesitate between business and duty. But perhaps it will be my nearest route to South-west Bend, which I hope to eventually reach. I wish to find there one Arthur Raymun."

"South-west Bend lies about sixteen miles directly south from here; but you need not go there to see Arthur Raymun. He lives at Chesterville, where I am going. He is my father."

"Your father?" almost gasped the other, while his face suddenly turned white, and he actually reeled in his saddle.

"Yes; but you are sick!" she cried, as she saw his nervousness, and the sudden pallor of his countenance.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Raymun; though I am more nervous than common to-day, this will soon pass away. There, I feel like myself again," he added, with a laugh, after a pause.

There was something underlying the words, and Miss Raymun noticed it, too, but that only increased the mystery.

"Well, sir stranger," she exclaimed, archly, "you have the advantage of me. I fain would know the name of my benefactor."

"Hart Range is what I answer to," he replied.

"A strange, romantic name; but I will vouch it is no stranger than he who bears it."

"From you I will accept that as a compliment, with thanks. Some do call me *peculiar*; but they are not those who know me best!"

"You must be a stranger in these parts to think that father lives at South-west Bend."

"I am an entire stranger; have just come from Taos. How fortunate for me to have seen you; and now, with your permission, we will start for Chesterville, though, to speak the truth, I can act only as protector, not guide."

"I am perfectly familiar with the way; but I assure you I shall be thankful for your protection after what has happened. Are you acquainted with papa?"

"No," answered Range, absently, as if the question had been wholly unexpected.

"Business, perhaps?" she continued, with woman's inquisitiveness.

"Yes; important business." Then he could have torn his tongue out for uttering the speech.

"Hallo-o-o!" They had just headed their horses homeward, when the cry rung over the prairie. Hastily glancing down the timber's edge, they saw a couple of horsemen approaching them at a mad gallop.

Not knowing whether they were friends or foes, Hart Range hastily examined his rifle, and calmly awaited their arrival.

As the horsemen drew near, it was seen that they were both young; and Range could barely keep from smiling, as he saw their dress, which was in the light of "civilized fashion," strangely out of place on the Shelby border. Unmentionables of fine broadcloth, with coat to match, patent-leather boots, and ruffled shirt, surmounted with a collar and neat looking necktie, all crowned with a shining, wide-rimmed felt hat made the stranger-plainman not envious but disdainful. They were well mounted, and armed with silver-mounted rifles, with fancy-carved stocks, which seemed more fitted for show than "business." Evidently they were "Northerners" seeking the sport and excitement of life on the plains.

"A pleasant day to you," greeted the foremost—a broad-shouldered, athletic man, with black hair and eyes, regular features, and nut-brown "Burnsides," in a clear, ringing tone. "Will you please direct us to the ranch of Col. Arthur Raymun? He lives at Chesterville, as it is called. I am his son, returning from college; and, with my friend here, have lost my way."

"We are going that way ourselves," answered Hart. "My companion is Col. Raymun's daughter. She—"

"Oh, Walter! can it be you, who has at last come back?" cried Miss Raymun. "You have changed so since you left home that I did not know you at first." Then, with a glad utterance, she slipped from her saddle, and rushed forward to meet the new-comer, who quickly dismounted, and, as she

fell into his extended arms, held her to his breast, murmuring:

"Yes, Alice, my prairie flower, it is your Walter, who, after four long years has returned to his beloved ones."

The greeting between the two seemed of more than brotherly and sisterly love. Hart Range, while a strange light lit up his features, turned aside as if to shut from view some fearful scene. The other new-arrival, a fair-skinned, light-haired man of tall, but rather slim build, with blue eyes and a blonde mustache, watched it all closely, while his restless gaze wandered from one to another as if trying to read their inmost thoughts.

Soon Alice introduced Hart Range to Walter Raymun, and he presented his friend and companion as Austen Warne, a college chum.

That was a glad meeting on the plain between those long separated; but night was coming on apace, and soon the little party was riding toward Chesterville—five leagues distant.

Once fairly on their way, but little was said. Walter rode by the side of Alice, while Austen Warne followed closed behind, with Hart Range, who was strangely silent, though, like the true frontiersman he was, continually on the alert for lurking foes, as he alone realized the peril besetting their path.

When Chesterville was nearly reached, to the surprise and disappointment of Alice, Hart Range declined to accompany them further, and turned a deaf ear against her entreaties to keep on with them to her father's house.

"Papa will not like it at all," she said. But her words did not avail, and merely promising to call in the morning for his horse, which she was still riding, he turned aside, with one last, lingering look, that haunted her for many a day.

As the others rode on, Range watched them intently until they disappeared. Somehow he seemed greatly disturbed, and his features bore unmistakable evidence of a mind ill at ease.

"Ah, my prairie queen!" he muttered, almost fiercely, "you little thought what you were asking when you invited me beneath your father's roof. But, oh God! can you be the child of him whom I have so long hunted, and have sworn shall die? Would that you were not, or else that I had never seen you! Yet I must not falter now—not even for you! I must stifle that hopeless love of mine; and though it will bring your own father to the grave, break your heart and mine, my vow is sacred, and must, shall be fulfilled!"

It was a pleasant, starlight evening, yet Hart Range was so deeply buried in his tempestuous meditations, that he was unconscious of aught around him, till suddenly he heard a light laugh, and felt a coil of rope fall about his person, pinioning his arms to his side, when he was a prisoner in the hands of unseen assailants!

CHAPTER V. THE WOOD SPIRIT.

So sudden and unexpected was the attack of his invisible enemy that before he had time to offer any resistance Hart felt the cord straighten, and found himself powerless. Vexed at his own stupidity and carelessness, he could but wait further developments, nor was he kept long in suspense.

Soon some one emerged from a thicket near at hand, and still holding the line firmly, quickly advanced, exclaiming in a clear, silvery voice, sounding strangely peculiar for that of a night marauder:

"Ho now, Sir Truant! is this the way you keep your word? and is this a specimen of your vaunted vigilance after so many years on the Texan frontier? 'Tis well Black Wayne and his outlaws are not living, or you would be their first victim! Serve you right, too! But I'll learn you a lesson. Consider yourself my prisoner, while I have half a mind to deliver you up to Randel's Rangers as a prowling sleeper. Ha—"

Suddenly the speaker paused, and the laugh turned to a startled cry, while Range uttered an exclamation of surprise as he beheld his captor. Expecting to see half a dozen or more of stalwart men leap from their concealment, instead, he saw but one person—and that was a woman!

Little wonder Hart Range was taken aback by the appearance of the elf-like being who had so abruptly and so strangely crossed his path. He had hastily nerved himself to meet his fate at the hands of brutal desperadoes, but found himself a captive in the hands of a confused, startled wild-wood nymph, flushed with excitement, anger, and terror, as she stammered:

"Oh—sir—a thousand pardons! I—I—I thought you were some one else!"

Then the coil slackened, and the weird, elfish lassier faced him in desperate defiance.

Perhaps the girlish figure confronting Hart Range was not what the "fashionable world" would call beautiful, yet she was bewitchingly charming. Of medium height, with a shapely, graceful form, attired in a fancifully trimmed and frilled suit of "border gray," encircled at the waist by a belt of buckskin, which was nearly reached by dark chestnut waves of silken hair falling down over her shoulders a *l'abandon*; flashing eyes that, seeming to burn with a mesmeric fire, wielded a magical power; nose slightly "pug"; a well-rounded dimpled chin; and a complexion, though somewhat marred by the bronze of long exposure to a southern sun, fresh and fair, wearing the rosy bloom of healthy vigor; all in perfect harmony with the contour of figure, the freedom of spirits, ease, grace and becoming *hardware* of bearing. She was armed with a light, single-barreled rifle, and a pair of revolvers. Though but a girl in form and years, she promised a formidable adversary.

"Well, sir!" she cried, after a moment, in a clear,

mellow tone, "are you frightened out of your wits that you sit there staring like a madman? Please throw off my lasso, and you are free to continue your way. But, take my advice and be a little more on your guard hereafter; there *might* be foes abroad, and perhaps you would not fare as well as you have at my hands."

Again she broke into a light, musical laugh so pleasing to the ear.

"Your pardon, miss, please," Hart at last found tongue to say; "but I little thought to see such a fairy rise in my path, and your presence quite startled me. You seem expert with the 'line.'"

"Who could not noose an object as lifeless as a stump? But, I repeat, will you allow me to have my thong, or shall I be obliged to *take* it?"

"It is often easier to tangle the skein than it is to unravel it," replied Range, as he *very* slowly loosed the cord, and allowed her to withdraw it.

"There; next time I catch you napping like this, you may not escape so easily," she said, with a merry twinkle of her flashing eye.

"Believe me, I shall profit by your teaching, and you will not have this pleasure again. But, and I ask it from no idle curiosity, who are you so fearlessly roving the country at this hour, that I am to thank for my lesson?"

"Thank your lucky star, and be more watchful and less impudent in the future!" came the cutting reply.

"You misunderstand me."

"Never mind, I forgive you. Our first meeting has been rather embarrassing; suppose we *forget* it; and if we do ever meet again, I demand it shall be as *strangers*! Do you understand?"

Ere Range had time to reply, the strange being turned her horse, and rode away into the darkness of the forest. But she had barely disappeared, when he heard her returning; soon she reached his side, and riding close to him whispered, in a warning tone:

"Beware how you roam at random in Chester woods to-night, if you value your life! They conceal more than one bloodthirsty foe lying in ambush!" Then she was gone to return no more; and again Hart Range was alone, wondering in spite of himself whether it had all been a dream, or a mysterious reality.

Hart, profiting by his singular experience and warning, though really only half believing the latter, rode cautiously forward near to the edge of the timber. To the south lay the settlement of Chesterville; ahead a quarter of a mile, the center of a small tract of prairie isolated from a main body to the north—Chester Plain—by a *chaparral* growth, rose the rude walls of a lone cabin, large in structure, and known as the "Prairie Home." Hither he was directing his course, but as he paused an instant he fancied he heard the murmur of voices. Listening a moment he satisfied himself that he was not mistaken; then the wood sprite's warning was brought vividly to mind, and his first impulse was to ride on. Still the sounds came no nearer—seemed to be wafted from one particular spot; and resolving to know who there was in the timber, he silently dismounted, and securing his horse to a tree, cautiously advanced through the forest, grasping in either hand a trusty revolver.

Range had not progressed far when he found he was near the men, whoever they were; and then slowly and carefully he worked toward them, till he reached the edge of the undergrowth which hid their forms, where he could easily hear every word spoken above a whisper.

"Sh, Tim! Not another word, or some one will hear us, and our game will be up. Besides, *he* will soon be here, and we must be ready. Are you firm, and in trim for business?"

"Waugh!"

No more was said; and lying under the shade of the thicket less than a rod distant, breathless and wordless, Hart calmly and patiently waited for the *dénouement*, half fearing, half knowing that some one's life was in deadly peril.

CHAPTER VI.

FATE'S STRANGE REVERSE!

SLOWLY and tediously five minutes wore away, and silence reigned throughout the timber, a stillness to Hart Range fearfully oppressive. He dared not stir, hardly breathe, for fear of betraying his presence, and was heartily wishing he had kept out of the vicinity. Then the ambushed men moved uneasily, and again in low whispers took up the thread of their conversation, blissfully ignorant of the pair of gleaming eyes trying to penetrate the darkness of their covert, or the eager ears drinking in every word they uttered.

"Why don't the coyote show his head?" growled one.

"Gone the other way, mebbe," came in reply.

"Then our fun is spilt, and we have had our trouble for nothing!"

"Jess like us pesky fools! I tole ye no good w'd kem o' this, but ye ar' alwus up to sum kine o' smash-up; an' hyar we ar', a pair o' half-starved wolves waitin' fer our hash to run inter our mowfs when we oughter be slamm'n round an' tearin' up things like we war sum chip on a stick! S'y, I reckon, pard, ye ain't much larnt round hyar."

"No."

"How kem ye strayin' round hyar loose, ennyway? Got lost, mebbe!"

"I had business which called mé this way."

"Sho! *Blind* fair, eh?" the other's curiosity prompted him to still question.

"Well, yes, sort of a secret affair; but if you will promise to keep silent on the matter, I don't mind tellin' you, as you have agreed to assist me."

"Heave ahead, ole hoss! mum's the word!"

"Oh, it's no story; only I have come from Taos to hunt down a chap, who, I think, is now in Shelby."

"Hist!" exclaimed the other, "what war thet? I thought I heerd sum one move in their brush jess ahint us!"

"Pho! you are more than com'mon nervous to-night, Tim."

"Wal, s'pose I am! my ears ar' worth es much es you'n, ef I do wear 'em!" came in angry response.

"Well, never mind; we won't compare ears till this job is off our hands, anyway."

"Jess so, pard. Ye say yer sort o' lookin' arter a leetle chick w'ot is tearin' round loose, an' can't eg-saxly put hisself ter roost when their dewes begins ter drop."

"I am trying to find one who used to stop in Taos valley, till it got too hot for him, and he had to leave; but not before he had deluged the place with the blood of some of our best men. He is the greatest desperado on the whole South-west border, and once I find him, justice shall end his crime-stained career, or I'll eat my oath!"

"D'ye think this am the cuss we ar' layin' for?"

"He must be! You are sure he is from Taos?"

"Sartin! Heerd him say so his own self."

"And he is quite tall, dark-skinned, and a regular dare-devil in a fight; with his long bowie and revolver will walk right through a dozen common men, scattering them as the wind does chaff!"

"Ye hev scored him, jess like a book! He's a full-grown torrernader done up in chain-lightning! He—"

"Hist! *he is coming!*"

Sure enough; footsteps were heard approaching, and the watchers in their retreat, whether good or bad, were quickly silent, nerving themselves for their work.

It was with the greatest difficulty that Hart Range could keep from betraying his position, such a nervousness had seized him within a few moments. What were these men, and who were they lying in wait for? Perhaps himself! and a shudder thrilled his frame. Be it as it would, a life was in peril! But who deserved his aid—those in ambush or their victim?

Nearer and nearer came the footsteps; soon the man would reach the fatal spot! the trap would be sprung! Hesitating but a moment, Hart decided his course of action. He would warn him of danger, and perhaps avoid a collision and bloodshed. Springing to his feet with a shout, he discharged his revolver into the air. A shriek from the thicket, and a rush of bodies, with other cries and curses.

Then, as Range hastily emptied the second chamber, a man burst through the growth, the bullet just passing over his head!

Startled, the new-comer rushed forward, and they stood face to face; both pale, trembling, excited.

"By heavens! what ar' ye doing?" and before Hart could comprehend the movement, the other had brought the muzzle of a rifle right to his face, exclaiming:

"Move and ye ar' dead!"

Hart Range was now at fearful odds.

Almost instantly the person for whom he had given the alarm which was likely to bring him serious trouble, appeared upon the scene.

"By Randal Rock!" he cried, "what's up, Bill? Wagh! who am this ye hev got strung on yer shooter?"

"I jess found this cuss raisin' Cain, an' I thought arter he felt like liftin' my ha'r I could help him, mebbe. But jess take them ar' playthings. Ef he don't stand quiet, I'll plug him!"

With no effect, Hart tried to satisfy his captors that he was befriending them; in vain he endeavored to convince them of his innocence of meditated mischief or harm; in spite of his protestations, his weapons were taken from him, and his arms securely fastened. He knew better than to offer resistance; that he felt would make captivity death.

"War he ther chap thet done the shootin'?" asked the one addressed as Rock.

"Yes," replied the other: "and he kem within a shake o' a beaver's tail o' takin' my top-knot!"

"Never mind, old boss, he shall swing fer it!"

"It was an accident, I assure you, gen—"

"Hold right on, old tocoy; you shall hev a chance to tell your yarn at ther trial; but I reckon it'll be no easy thing to proof it. By ther way, stranger, where'd ye git thet hoss hitched out thar? Mighty sleek beast."

"I captured him from a party of desperadoes on the plain, this afternoon."

"Sho! Guess thet won't go down! Cap'en," he added, turning to his companion, "let's be moving; and when we git thar, ef ye don't say this chap has Sam Bradford's hoss, that Black Wayne and his robbers stole a year ago, I'll eat rattlers!"

"Goin' ter let them t'other fellers go?"

"Reckon they ar' gone afore this! wagh!"

As the twain and their prisoner reached the border of the forest, where our adventurer had left his steed, they both agreed in declaring it to be the animal designated.

"Thar!" exclaimed Bill, triumphantly, "ain't it all es plain as Chimby rock on Platte? Ef this cuss o' a stranger sneak'n' round hyar ter-night, ain't one o' the masked outlaws' gang, then I'll cut sticks!"

Forcing back as best he could his fast-rising choler, Hart silently submitted to the inevitable. At last he reached the Prairie Home, but how different from what he had expected!

CHAPTER VII.

A TEXAN "COURT" SCENE—THREE DAYS OF GRACE.

WHEN it became known at large that an outlaw was confined at the Prairie Home, and would have his trial that morning, it was set down by the sages

of that energetic "city," Chesterville, to be an *important* day. For a whole year, there had been an unusual calm in that immediate vicinity—only six duels, eight murder affairs, some petty robberies, two fires, a daily bar-room brawl, an occasional shooting-match, and a "few frolics with the bowie"—so that the old plainsmen were shaking their heads, and looking mountainward, declaring, "that things war gettin' oncomf'ortable, and powder givin' to waste!" Thus the "court" promised a big thing—the great event of the season; and the "second hour's" sun saw a large crowd centered at the lone tavern; so immense, in fact, that contrary to intention, it was demanded that the prisoner be brought out under the huge live-oak just back, where all could witness the proceedings.

Pale, yet calm and self-possessed, Hart was led out under the giant tree. He had felt confident that he should be acquitted without trouble; but as his eye ran over the motley assembly, he could not help shuddering, as he thought what his fate would be, should he fail to pl'nkly prove his case.

Austen Warner, Walter and Alice Raymun had been sent for, and he hoped they would appear for his defense. In them lay his only hope.

After some discussion it was decided that the prisoner should be tried before one Killburn, familiarly called "The Doc," present proprietor of the Home, and claimed to be "chock full" of legal lore; so Doc Killburn was pompously installed as "your Honor;" and after hastily impanneling a jury, without regard to aught save number, the "court" was ready for business.

True Bill was rst heard, with his story of the capture; and as he told of his narrow escape from being shot by the stranger, fierce, revengeful cries went up against the captive, from the infuriated throng.

"Captain Randal," called the "court."

Bill's companion then corroborated his story, while the tumult of the frenzied mob increased in fury, till it seemed impossible to keep the rabble at bay. The accused trembled as he saw the tide of "public opinion" going against him. He was fast losing courage.

The horse was next brought forward and quickly identified as the one stolen from the settlement by the outlaws nearly a year before.

"Lynch him!" thundered the mad *posse*, growing more and more excited. This unconnected chain of circumstantial relation—it could not be called *evidence*—had seemed to their selfish, crazy minds sufficient proof to convict the man without further hearing; not thinking or caring in their fiendish haste that there was another side to the question yet unheard.

"The verdict! the verdict!" howled an old, gaunt, weather-beaten mountaineer.

"Yes! yes!"

"Rope him!"

In vain "his Honor" demanded "silence." Stimulated by bad liquor, of which they had partaken freely that morning to "celebrate" the event coming, and blind with excitement, there were those who were determined to see an execution, let their victim be guilty or not.

Twice Hart commenced his story, and was obliged to stop. The threats were growing more and more ominous, and his position was getting to be one of extreme danger. His gaze wandered over the surging multitude, for at least the hundredth time, hoping to meet a familiar face, but not one could he find. No; not a single friendly countenance. Had *she* deserted him, whom he so longed to see, and whose smile would have given him joy even in this trying moment? But hoping was in vain; he was a stranger among strangers, and if there were those who would befriend him they were awed into inaction by the rioters.

"We can't save you!" whispered "the court," as Range again tried to make himself heard. Alas! the words seemed too true! The crisis was at hand!

Renewed yells and the fiendish rabble were rushing to execute their hellish designs!

"Why are you standing there like a stump, Rock Randal?" a shrill, piercing voice cried. "What is the duty of you and your Regulators if it is not to protect the defenseless? Out upon you for a dastard! Why, I thought you were man enough to see fair play, and not let a drunken rabble, *hired* to murder a guiltless victim in this manner, accomplish their devilish purpose. If you are afraid to face them, I will!"

Sudden, unexpected, thrilling, the strange speech checked the rioters' mad career, and sent a hushed stillness through the startled gathering. In the fearful excitement, no one had heeded the appearance of a new arrival upon the scene, and as the astonished listeners looked for the speaker they beheld a wild, elfish-looking being, riding a strangely-spotted mustang.

Hart instantly recognized her as the wildwood nymph he had met the evening before, and a glad cry escaped his lips.

"Tis Wild Kate!" some one exclaimed, and the amazed group echoed the words.

Then the voice of Rock Randal followed:

"Regulators of Chesterville, Wild Kate is right! Let's see fair play."

At the word from their leader, a score of men, who had previously been silent and resistless spectators of the performance, quickly stepped forward, and the next instant, with presented rifles, stood in defense of the captive.

"Stand back, every hoss of ye!" cried Rock, authoritatively. "This man, be he friend or foe, shall have a fair trial."

The baffled horde slunk back in terror, and "the court" went on with its proceedings.

Hart was then sworn, and allowed to tell his story

without interruption, which he did in a clear, frank way, but still it carried little or no conviction to the jurymen's prejudiced minds.

"The court understood ye ter say thet ye kem frum Taos. Wot biz hed ye ter kem frum thar ter Chesterville?"

"I do not consider that a proper question, and decline to answer," replied the prisoner.

"The court axed ye a squar' question, an' ef ye war all right ye'd spit it out on ther blunt!"

"It was business which I am not at liberty to divulge."

"Sho!" and "his Honor" smiled blandly, as he nodded to the "jury" with a knowing wink, as much as to say, "There is an important point gained."

"Next!"

As Hart stepped away from the stand, he saw to his joy that Alice Raymun, with her brother and his friend, had arrived. Quickly signifying his wishes, they were consulted, and in a few minutes Alfred Raymun and Austen Warne, in turn, told what little they knew about him, though adding nothing to his case.

Last, Alice gave a straightforward and vivid account of her adventure and rescue. As she dwelt in glowing terms upon her deliverer's unselfish heroism, how, single-handed, he had faced the fierce desperadoes, and finally saved her from their clutches by his intrepid bravery, a shout of admiration went up from the crowd in spite of the boisterous feeling which predominated but a few minutes before. Then, as she told how he came by the outlaw's horse, the prisoner seemed to gain in favor; and when the fair witness who had so earnestly pleaded for his life, finished, a storm of applause rent the air.

Hart Range could scarcely conceal his admiration for his lovely friend. Twice, as his gaze wandered from her to the strange being called Wild Kate, he fancied he saw an angry, contemptuous scowl darken the wail's countenance.

As his daughter ceased speaking, Col. Raymun offered a few eloquent remarks for the prisoner, not hesitating to say that he considered their accusation unfounded.

Then, with a full sense of the importance of his undertaking "the judge" arose to deliver his charge to the jury. Drawing his cadaverous form to its full length, with his shock head poised on one side, and his thumbs thrust into the arm-pits of his vest, he swung open his enormous tobacco-mill, and clearing from the entrance a huge quid of "pig-tail," began to howl in a solemn way his "stunin' lectur'" as it was put down in the annals of Chesterville:

"Gentlemen o' ther jurer: My modesty keeps me from risin' to ther elevation o' this perfunctory erection; it clings ter my coat-tail like a baboon shinnin' a lightnin' rod! Tharfor y' mustn't think I don't feel ther mighty responsibility, the—the solemn dooty thet one in my lofty position is bound ter h'ist, fer I'm jess full and b'illin' over with raal natural gumption, no, gen'us, thet's it every pop, quick-er'n a rattler c'd'ud turn a hand-speek! My boss beavers, king-pins o' Shelby, ye hev heerd the bull thing frum rut to branch, an' never, no never has sich an intellectual gob o' eddifyin' interwidoals gawked with sich dumfounded lissitude to ther perspirin' evidence this yer 'coon o' law has got up fer ye. O' course I needn't linger on ther doin's, ye'll hit the speck right on ther pint thet I lick. Ther pris'n'r am all yite o' coorse, an' ef we don't dispute ther gal, he am a regular snortin' grizzler in a rough an' tumble in tear up an' smash round. But, jess 'member thet he hain't improved hisself enny thing more'n a stranger, an' fer all we larn he is a sheep tearin' round like a kangaroo! I—I—jess sling in yer verdict less'n three shakes o' a painter's tail! This 'coon am in a powerful drought! tongue cluv right to ther ruf o' his mouf!"

"While 'his Honor' was trying to remove the friction from his tongue by means of a long-necked bottle, the "jury" watching with longing eyes and watery lips, was buried in deep meditation.

"Say, Mister Foremost, hain't ye 'greed on a verdict?"

"Yas," answered a tall, raw-boned ex-trapper, who had been chosen as spokesman; "we's 'greed."

"Spit it out then, an' not stand thar like a turkey peekin' in a bottle!"

"Wal," said the "foreman," shutting up one eye and squinting over his nose with the other, "we's all 'greed on a verdict. This boss thinks es ther pris'n'r is a two-legged torrernader, an' he'd better levant! Jim Jones says he is half Mexican, an' he bed better git! Pat Histon thinks he don't know him. Peleg Smith reckons he ain't safe to be round loose, an' we'd better rope him! Sam—"

"Thar! thar! Mister Range! hyar the verdict. Now I'll perounce the execution; not guilty o' bein' yerself, if ye levant within three days!"

CHAPTER VIII.

"THE RHINOSNERROSS FROM TAOS."

The trial had come to a satisfactory end, and after charging the prisoner on penalty of death to be sure to "git up and git" within three days, he was freed, and the "court" adjourned sine die.

Among those who pressed around Hart to congratulate him on his escape was Col. Raymun and his daughter. The latter, radiant and smiling, he greeted with a glad welcome. But when he grasped the hand of her father, a great change seemed to come over him. In spite of himself, he could not help trembling, and the color would leave his cheek, while his voice was hoarse and husky. Still the colonel's open, frank manner soon partially dispersed the shadow, and he found himself conversing quite freely.

Our adventurer found it impossible to wholly refuse the invitation which was extended to him by the colonel and Alice to spend the day at their home.

A word from her decided him to accompany them on their return.

Looking back, as they rode away from the prairie tavern, Hart saw Wild Kate near the live-oak, where she had ridden up to save him, by her presence of mind, from the infuriated mob. She had been intently watching him, but the moment she caught his gaze, her riding-whip was raised with an angry swish; and smarting from the cruel blow, her mustang bore her madly across the plain.

"Who is that strange appearing woman whom you call Wild Kate?" he could not help asking.

"She is a sort of wandering waif who belongs at South-west Bend. Her father was a horse-thief, who was hung the other day, and since that she has been seen in this vicinity. They say she is crazy."

"Crazy! that accounts for it all," Hart said, absently. "But she saved my life to-day."

"Yes; she had more presence of mind than Randal and all his Regulators. I suppose, Mr. Range, you will be obliged to make your stay in Chesterville short?"

"Col. Raymun, I am not going to be driven out of Shelby county. When I get ready I shall leave, and not before, unless I am carried out a corpse!"

"I must say, I admire your courage," replied the colonel, "and you can count on me as your friend. But Alice was saying that you have come all the way from Taos merely to see me. Business, I suppose?"

A dark scowl clouded for a moment Hart Range's visage, as he hastened to reply, in a strangely accented tone:

"Yes, Col. Raymun; I have come many a league on purpose to see you; but—but I am not prepared for business just now."

"You will act your own pleasure, of course."

The colonel had not failed to detect the strange expression of the other's countenance, and was perplexed.

We will not accompany them further. Notwithstanding the shadow seeming to hang over his existence, Hart passed a pleasant day. He was particularly favored with the company of the fair Alice, and whether he would or not he found himself madly, perhaps hopelessly, in love.

Walter Raymun was a genial companion; and Austen Warne, too, was pleasant and agreeable; but somehow Range fancied a coldness was springing up between himself and the auburn-haired collegian. Every little attention the other paid Miss Raymun, he watched with a jealous eye, thinking bitterly in his mind: This man is my rival, and him have I to fear.

In spite of his resolution to make his visit short at the Raymun hacienda, the day was nearly gone before Hart went back to the Prairie Home, where he found quite a crowd still congregated, putting on the finishing touches of their "celebration" of the "court." He knew he was running a risk in returning to the place, but with a bold front he was going to hazard the attempt.

The throng greeted him with a half-contemptuous, half-malignant gaze, and instinctively our adventurer felt he had two enemies for every friend in the motley assembly. But, appearing calm and self-assuring, he smilingly invited them up to the bar, and at his expense they drank to the health of Doc Killburn, "the boss king-pin o' Shelby."

The bums at the bar had drained their glasses, and were beginning to think that "ther strange yunker warn't sich a heap wuss beaver arter all," when a wild, howling yell suddenly burst upon their ears, and then a dark form shadowed the doorway, when a black-visaged, burly-framed man attempting to cross the threshold, tripped and measured his length on the tavern floor, with a crash which made the building fairly tremble.

A moment the new-comer lay like a log, then slowly contracting his lower limbs, he raised himself on one elbow and peering cautiously around, exclaimed anxiously:

"Am I a goner? Terrible clap! ennybody kilt?"

Seeing that no one seemed to heed his question, the fallen hero, with a blood-curdling howl, clawed the air for a while as he regained an upright position; and then fairly dancing to keep on his feet, he shrieked:

"Don't ye spot me! I'm ther roarin' rhinosnerross frum Taos, jess kem up fer to smash down and tear up enny grinnin' galoot wot consulls me! D'ye hyar neow? whar am ther coyote wot won't 'spect his betters?"

Still the crowd was silent, surprised, amused.

Steadying himself as best he could in the middle of the room, the stranger leered at those around him, with a drunken, commiserating stare.

"W'at ar' ye leanin' up thar for like a pack uv fewshin' ninnies w'at don't hev enny manners? W'y don't ye duff yer skulps, and make yer bend, when yer boss am round? I'm the ragin' rhinosnerross frum Taos, an' I'll larn ye wot politeness is!" and the speaker, making a lunge for the bar missed, when again his rags swept the dust.

It seemed for a time as if the stranger's politeness had got the best of him; but before long he rallied, and staggering to his feet, with another terrific shout, he planted his brawny fist on the bar, roaring:

"I s'pose ye all think I'm jess funnin', but ye'll find to yer sorrow thet I'm a wild rhinosnerross let loose on a rampage. I hain't tramped all ther way frum Taos jess ter show myself. I'm on bizness!"

The "big animal" paused, as if to note the effect of his rather startling declaration; then continued:

"Yas! that am the ijee, bizness! I hev kem up to pick the tall feathers outen a leetle shaver wot's no biz round hyar! Whar am he? Jess pass him over or I'll chaw up— Whoop! thar he kem!"

At this juncture Rock Randal entered the room.

Quickly placing himself in the Regulator chief's path, the giant growled:

"Hain't ye frum Taos?"

"Wagh! This 'coon am a Taos boy!"

"Ky-yi! I reckon ye hain't forget ther old two-horned rhinosnerross wot cavorts round like a blind hurricane! Hyar he am!"

Without seeming to notice that important personage, Rock passed up to the counter.

With an angry growl the big beast of prey followed, and clapping his hand on the Ranger's shoulder, exclaimed:

"Don't ye see me? I'm a heap hungry, and ye ar' my meat!"

"This beaver don't chip ther trail, he don't, wagh!"

"Blar-r, yer leetle sprout! I've kem ter plant ye!"

"I reckon ye'll never sprout, ef ye don't take thet paw in!"

"Sho! yer a black-an'-tan—"

"Dandy Rock, the prairie chick, I am! whoop!" cried that worthy, as he drained his glass, and brought it down on the bar with such force that he shivered it to atoms; one of the flying pieces striking the bully just under the eye cut a long, deep gash.

Maddened by the wound, the giant boaster hurled himself forward, and with a well-directed blow, felled Rock to the floor, senseless.

CHAPTER IX.

A DESPERADO AT BAY.

"HOORAY! I'm the boss o' Texas!" roared "the rhinosnerross," as Dandy Rock fell. Then, in a frenzied fury, he rushed upon the fallen Regulator, and would have stamped his brains out upon the floor, but Hart Range standing near seized him by the collar, and hurled him violently back.

Quickly recovering, showing no signs of intoxication now, the bully gave another yell, and threw himself upon Range.

"I'll show ye how ter rip me round by ther neck-girt, ye leetle, pindlin' upshoot! Take thet! and thet! an—"

The giant doubtless expected to annihilate his adversary with a single sweep of his arm, but in his blind excitement he was no match for the other's cool, determined front, as he quickly found to his sorrow. His "take thet an' thet" proved merely "figures in the air;" and as Hart calmly dashed aside the sledge-hammer blows, he dealt him a terrific "left-hander" between the eyes, which placed head and heels on a level.

As the ruffian fell, the lookers-on cheered Hart lustily. In a moment Rock recovered his senses, and was on his feet.

"Whar's ther coyote thet clipped me?" he fairly shrieked.

"Takin' a nap thar!" answered a bystander.

"Sho! thet him? Who laid him out so purty?"

Ere a reply was given the discomfited blusterer staggered to his feet, half blind, foaming with rage.

"Hain't ye got no perliteness? Punch a feller in thet way! I'll larn ye sum manners! I'll show ye how to paw ther wild rhinosnerross o' all Mexiker! I'll break yer hide. I'll—"

"Jess stand still, old grave-yard, an' let me gi'n ye a lifter!" cried Dandy Rock, desperately; "I'll knock ye nine rods!"

"Howgh-ough!" snorted the animal from Taos. Then, a twelve-inch bowie flashed in the air, and the desperado made a furious lunge for Dandy Rock, who, quickly springing aside, left him to turn upon Hart Range. Dexterously extending his foot, Hart caught him on his toe, and for the fourth time the roisterer "bit the dust" on the bar-room floor.

It was only a moment before the bully was on his feet again.

"W'at for ar' ye bamboozlin' me round in this yer way?" he gasped, addressing Hart. "Ye kick an' scratch an' bite an' tear round like an allegater in a mud-puddle, but ther hain't no fairness 'bout ye! Ye take me unawares an' pelt me awful so thet I won't try to hev enny more fun with ye! 'Sides I hain't got no bizness with ye. 'Tis this yer long-haired cuss wot I hev strapped over frum Taos tew plant!"

"Beware how you cross my path, and there will be no trouble," answered Range.

"But you an' me ain't squar!" cried Randal; "ye hev dug a grave, an' one o' us hes got to fill it!"

The bully was at bay. He saw that the sympathy of the outsiders to a man was with Rock, and he felt that he had "started a lion instead of a hare." Still, he had gone too far to retreat; he must fight it out.

"Tya! Needn't think ye hev bu'sted the great, howlin' rhinosnerross, fer the stomp o' his futetaps an' ther roar o' his voice will be hyer long arter ye hev pegged out! Oh! I can't tear round still! Git me a shooter an' cum on, ef ye ain't a sneakin', good-fer-nuthin' Greaser!"

"Jess say the wuss, capen," said True Bill; "an' we will rope the cuss less'n a wink o' a mule's ear."

"Oh, no, Bill; it am a personal affair, an' I am goin' to hev satisfaction, or git throwed."

"Hi! old saff'n hide, w'y don't ye wake up? Daresn't ye meet me ten paces?"

"By Randal Rock!" cried the Regulator chief. "I am not afeerd o' enny sich galoot es ye ar' at enny time. I'cept yer challenge, an' will meet ye with pistols, ten paces."

"Checked!" grunted the other.

Considerable excitement was manifest among the spectators. All knew that a duel was inevitable, and that meant death to one or the other—perhaps their leader.

"Now ye ar' spittin' sense, old hosses! but muzzle shootin' am death on dry narves, so jess step up an' hev sumthin' wot'll make ye like mad two-year-old

yearlin' bufflers! Kem, stranger, capen; ye may never hev this priv'lege ag'in!" cried Doc. Killburn, with an eye to "business."

"Whoop-ee!" bellowed the one from Taos, "hyar's the two-horned rhinossnerloss wot don't need no second axin'. Stomp up, old ponies! an' lift ter yer better's excess! Pass on yer benzine, old shuttle-top! Pile it up, I say, higher nor the Pacific pond, fer I am dryer nor the north pole in ther summer time!"

While the bummers were carousing at the bar, Rock was giving Bill a few hasty directions in regard to the duel.

"Hyar! I reckon thet'll keep me narves up, an' last me till I ken ring a cold deal on ther long-haired cuss!" exclaimed the stranger, as he emptied his glass for the third time. "Kem on, ef ye warnt ter see ther wild hoss from all Mexiker knock in ther headlights o' yer Texer painter!" and he made a rush for the door, passing out at headlong speed. Others hastily followed, with Randel at their head.

As the bully rushed out, a fierce gleam suddenly shone upon his features, while a desperate resolve flashed through his mind. His horse was at the corner of the building less than ten feet away; the Regulator chief was ahead of all his companions; the way seemed clear; why need he risk his life before the other's unerring rifle, when by a single quick and determined shot he could slay his foe, and then in the confusion escape without harm?

No quicker thought than done. With strategic abruptness, he wheeled upon his victim; a pistol instantly shone in the air; and ere any in the room could comprehend the movement it was leveled at their leader, his eye had measured its length and his finger had pressed its trigger. But before it was discharged a sharp report rung out, and the cowardly stranger threw up his hands, and fell to the earth in a huddled heap.

Surprised and startled, it was a moment before the crowd could realize what had transpired. Outside, with a revolver in his hand still smoking from its fire, stood Hart Range. Plainly, to his presence of mind and prompt action Rock Randel owed his life.

"By Randel Rock!" cried the Regulator, advancing and grasping the young adventurer's hand, "ye saved my top-knot thet pop, sure, and hyar's my paw fer it. But, Jonas! who'd a thought the sneak w'd hev been up ter sich cussedness!"

"I saw mischief in his eyes, and divined his intentions," replied Hart, as calmly as if speaking of trifles.

Then, around the fallen desperado gathered the spectators. Evidently his life-blood was fast ebbing away, and soon his spirit would pass over the dark shore.

"Who war it thet throwed me?" gasped the dying wretch, as, for a moment, he rallied. "Sarved me right, too," he added. "Cusses 'pon ther head o' Joe Corinth! but fer him, I sh'd'n't hev bin hyar! I didn't want ther job, fer I knowed it war no boys' play; but he piled me with pizen, and hyar I am! But, Rock Randel, 'member what I tell ye, fer I'm talkin' Gospil truth. *Thar ar' a blind trail surroundin' ye, an' afore ye know it ye will be rubbed out!* Joe Corinth an' a Mexiker hev sed it, an' with thirty men to back 'em ar' huntin' ye down like coyotes!"

Overcome by his exertions, the man fell back to the ground, and save his slow and difficult breathing, lay perfectly quiet. But soon he rallied again, and starting to a sitting posture, his eyes wandered over the assembly till they rested upon Hart Range, still holding his revolver, when he exclaimed:

"Waugh! ye ar' the one wot guv me my pass to eternity. Wal, it shan't be sed thet Black Line walked out squealing! But wot are ye hyar fer, ennyway? fer I know ye jess like a book, 'Tiger uv Taos,' an' ye needn't think I don't! Men o' Chesterville, don't furgit my last warnin'! Beware o' thet lightning-handed sport, es ye w'd a copperhead, fer the Tiger o' Taos has kem ter Shelby fer no good! He—"

Exhausted, the wounded unknown dropped back, and almost instantly expired.

The tool of the outlaw leader had perished in the cowardly work he had undertaken; and San Mullre, the revengeful Mexican, with his accomplice, had got to devise new plans before he could carry out his accursed scheme of unwarranted, unhallowed vengeance.

For the part he had acted Hart Range had won the admiration of all, and the friendship of more than one. Still the dread edict hung over his head—three days, then beware. But Rock Randel, chief of the Rangers and Regulators, had boldly declared that the first man in Shelby who offered to execute the mandate should die, and, in spite of the strange warning they had received, half of his followers seconded the declaration. Thus ended another day in the history of Chesterville.

CHAPTER X.

"LOST, LOST TO ME!"

A GALA time for Chesterville.

Four days have passed since the scenes depicted at the Prairie Home occurred. Hart Range is still in Chesterville, stubbornly determined to stay, though loud and deep are the threats against him on one side, while others are bold in declaring their friendship. He has spent much of his time at Raymun hacienda, for, in spite of the barrier, he, and he alone, seems to place between himself and the colonel, he has found an irresistible attraction there. With Walter, he is on friendly terms; but Austen Warne, though genial and agreeable, he fancies is his enemy, and, defying his honest endeavor to hold it in check, a fierce, jealous hate rankles in his breast against the light-haired collegian. Ay, love and hatred are twins composed of the same elements,

with only variation to mark the distinction of their vagaries.

Little heeded the good people of Chesterville this side drama. Something to them of more importance claimed their thoughts and held their minds active. What was it? The coming picnic? 'Twas nothing else, and promising a *live*, enthusiastic gathering, such as only an energetic border town can inaugurate, no wonder cares and sorrows were temporarily forgotten; not strange if minor pleasures and affairs were overlooked.

In Chester grove on the bank of the Rio Borte congregated the pleasure-seekers; such an assembly that it truly seemed as if every home in Shelby had been vacated.

The picnic was passing off pleasantly. All were joyous, satisfied. For the benefit of the gentry a trial at rifle-shooting was made, and to the surprise of some, disappointment of a few and satisfaction of many, Hart Range won fairly the laurels and found himself the hero of the day. Athletic sports freely found participants; but to avoid acting too prominent a part, and also hoping to effect an object uppermost in his mind, he had quietly withdrawn. Lost were the smiles and blandishments the fair ladies of Chester border so lavishly bestowed upon him. Alice Raymun, with a single glance from her blue eyes, had effected what all others failed in; had brought to him a suspense that was unendurable; and now, at last, he determined to hazard fate—to know what destiny held in store.

Fortune seemed to favor Hart. Tired of watching the proceedings, Miss Raymun soon wandered away from the crowd, and, as if by accident, he joined her. Then, a pleasant conversation followed, when at last, after strolling a considerable distance up the river-bank, he suddenly paused, and almost abruptly broached the subject nearest his heart.

"Miss Raymun—Alice, if you will allow me the liberty—I have impatiently waited for this opportunity; I feel you will pardon me in my hastiness for what I am about to say, when you know that to-morrow I must leave Shelby, and perhaps forever!" said Hart, slowly; the last, very slowly.

"Leave Shelby to-morrow forever?" repeated Alice, wonderingly. "Why so, Mr. Range?"

"Please do not speak so formal, Alice—Miss Raymun—you have called me Hart; why not now?"

"Our acquaintance will hardly warrant it," she hastened to reply. "But you have not told me why you must leave so suddenly and so soon. Is it because you have tired of us and giddy Chesterville, or does business call you away? Surely we have tried to make your stay pleasant."

"I like Chesterville, and appreciate the kindness which has been shown me; and I have found one to whom if I knew my departure would bring a regret, it would pain me to go."

"You speak in riddles, Mr. Range; pray, who is the fortunate person?"

"Need I speak plainer, Alice?" he cried, eagerly, seizing her hands in his. "Can't you see? don't you know that I love, love you madly? and I have reasons to hope not in vain."

"Oh, Hart—Mr. Range—don't! it can't be! spare me, I beseech you!"

"Alice, my first and only love! can it be that you spurn me? Are you so false and fickle that you have been playing with me as the serpent beguiles its victim to destroy? I know our meeting has been short; but from the first moment I saw you, I have loved you—a true, unselfish devotion. Now, say that I have not hoped in vain, that you will be mine, mine, and I ask no higher—"

"Spare me! spare us both, I pray! What you ask can never, never be!"

As a seal of doom, Hart Range received the words. Suddenly he was painfully silent, and deathly pale. His form shook and quivered like a leaf before the gale.

"Oh, Hart!" the other quickly added; "speak, say I have not offended you! Forgive me! oh, forgive me! I do care for you, but not as I would to be your wife; besides, my heart and hand are pledged to another!"

"Then," exclaimed Range, rallying as if from a fearful blow, "you thrust me aside for another."

"No! no! not that; but, but—" sobs checked further utterance.

"A thousand pardons, Miss Raymun," plead Hart; "I have been too hasty! too cruel! Forgive me for the pain I have caused you; forget what I have said, though you can little realize the effort it costs me to say it. So Austen Warne has forestalled me; but I will not complain. God grant it may be for the best—that you may be happy with him. Now, I must do my work and leave Shelby at once, never to return."

"Stay, Hart! you do Mr. Warne a great injustice; though I respect him as a friend of Walter's, he is nothing to me!"

"Austen Warne nothing to you? Alice, you are trifling."

"I repeat, Mr. Range, he is nothing to me. I am betrothed to Walter Raymun!"

"What! your brother?" almost gasped Hart.

"Walter is not my brother; I am not Col. Raymun's daughter, as you seem to suppose—only an adopted child."

"Excuse me! I see now! Oh, why have I been so blind? And Austen Warne is not my rival?"

"What a foolish idea! But now I have been frank with you, please be reasonable and do not get angry. Believe me, I am as sorry as you that this should have happened. Let us part as friends, at least," and she extended her hands.

"Must—must I consider your answer irrevocable? Think before you reply. You said a moment ago that you cared for me. Do you love Mr. Raymun?"

"Your conduct is unwarrantable. Once for all, I say no! I *must* wed Walter. Our wedding-day is appointed."

"And you will marry him simply because your hand was plighted before your heart met its choice? It will be a mockery!"

"Hold, Mr. Range! From any other person I would not take all this; but you and I can be friends, if nothing nearer. Will you have it so? 'Tis all I can offer."

"Your will, not mine, be done," said Hart, calmly, as he grasped her hand, and pressed it to his lips; "but this is a rude awakening from a cherished dream. Better, perhaps, would it have been had we never met. Still I accept your decision, without murmuring, though you know not the pang it costs me. A different one from you would have averted a fearful blow—Stay, I will not threaten. But you say he is not your father. So—Again, pardon me, for I am not myself now. We part as friends—friends that are never to meet again, for, ere I sleep, I shall be far, far from Chesterville, and all that I hold dear!"

"Don't do anything rash, for my sake, friend Hart. Remember, too, that wherever you go you have my best wishes."

A few words more, a murmured "farewell," and Hart Range was alone.

As Alice glided away through the growth, he could not help exclaiming, half aloud:

"Lost, lost to me! and rightly too, for she was too high, good and noble for such as I. One with such a destiny as mine deserves naught but thwarted plans and blasted hopes. But my way is clear now and again I must take up the trail of vengeance and follow it through to the bitter end! I—"

Glancing up, he stood face to face with Wild Kate!

CHAPTER XI.

A RIDE FOR LIFE—THE PRAIRIE APPARITION.

"Your pardon, sir, for my intrusion," said the strange waif; "but I have sought you for your own good. Judging by your manner, your interview with Miss Raymun was not a pleasant one. Perhaps Fate has been severe."

"You have read the Book-bright, Miss Kate," replied Hart, quickly, half believing she had overheard it all. "But little can you know or realize of life's blighted hope!"

"Hold, Hart Range! You know not what you are saying! What is the disappointment you have received compared to the wretchedness of a life wrecked by crime and dishonor; of a heart not only broken but bleeding from disgrace; of a soul outcast, spurned and despised? The pangs you have felt Time will soon heal; but the sufferings of pride and honor, never, never!"

"Forgive me! forgive me, Kate!" cried Hart, seeing the other's sudden grief, as from the awakening of a hidden sorrow; "I did not intend to wound you so; I was hasty! But, if you will not consider me too presuming, I supposed you one of the most blithe, light-hearted persons in the world. Why this? You must be jesting!"

"Were you not a stranger here, I would not take you at your word. But have you ever heard my name coupled with aught but contemptuousness? A wanderer! daughter of a gambler, horse-thief, who, only a few days ago met the punishment his career demanded at the end of the rope! Such am I! There, despise me as the rest of the world does! I am only Wild Kate, and shall not mind it!"

"Excuse me, Miss Kate, you not only do yourself an injury, but you heap injustice upon others. I, for one, do not believe that the child is guilty, or should in any way suffer, for the misdemeanors of the parent. I think none the less of you for what you have said, and no matter what may come, you can consider me your friend."

"Thank you, Mr. Range; yours are the first words of kindness that have greeted my ears—the sweetest I have ever heard. But," she added, instantly, "enough of this. I have come to warn you of impending danger. Your stay in Shelby is fraught with great peril! Take my advice, and flee while you can. Give up your scheme. There is nothing to keep you here now, so fly ere it is too late. Desperate men are even now plotting your destruction and death! Oh, heed my words, and go, go before yonder sun reaches the western sky! God grant you may escape! Farewell!"

Again Hart Range was alone under a darker cloud than ever.

"Who is that strange being who takes such an interest in me?" he asked of himself, as he hurried toward his horse; "and how does she know my affairs and perils so well? By Jove! I would willingly leave Chesterville, if that would solve the mystery. But no! I must and will stay till my mission is fulfilled; then adieu forever!"

By this time Hart had reached his animal, and as he sprang upon the steed's back, he suddenly caught sight of Wild Kate riding madly across Chester Plain, heading up the timber's edge toward Red Lands. A second glance, he saw the cause, when a wild thrill shot through his frame.

Alice Raymun had sought the companionship of Walter, and accompanied by Austen Warne, they had left the company for a canter on the prairie. But almost at the start, her high-mettled horse had been frightened, and in her frantic efforts to hold him in check, the rein broke like rotten twine, and, snorting, plunging, the startled beast galloped furiously on. With difficulty, she managed to keep her seat, as she was borne over the greensward at a fearful pace, every moment threatening to be her last. Walter and Warne, both at best poor riders, were soon left far behind. But Wild Kate, the first to notice her peril, was dashing up by the forest to intercept the fugitive.

Acting with quick perception, Hart Range joined in the chase, his fleet-footed sorrel bounding over the earth at far swifter speed than even the flying runaway.

Anxiously Hart crowded on his willing steed, for his imperiled friend was still far in advance, and it seemed impossible for him to rescue her. Kate's spotted mustang was doing splendid work, but oh! how frail the slender cord upon which hung their hope of saving the endangered life!

On, on, rushed the pursued and pursuers. Alice Raymun's long hair was streaming in the wind, and her white face was turned back in mute supplication, as she still retained her precarious position; but would she be able, till they could overtake her in that headlong race? At any moment she might be hurled to the earth, and trampled to death!

Faster and faster Hart pressed forward, calmly, till suddenly he saw the frightened horse turn abruptly to the left and plunge for the low-limbed forest which skirted the plain on the west. Then his face blanched, and his form trembled, as he felt that all was lost! But nerved to still swifter action, he unmercifully spurred his steed ahead to intercept the other, if possible. Wild Kate, with lasso in hand, kept close by his side.

As Alice saw her new danger and inevitable destruction, an involuntary cry escaped her lips. She saw her friends rushing to her aid, but felt they were too late! Instinctively she closed her eyes to hide the fearful vision. Another rod and she would have been torn from her saddle by the outstretching limbs; but swift almost as the lightning's flash, Hart Range dashed down, and as he swept past, his strong arm encircled her waist, when she was lifted from her perilous position upon the withers of his gallant sorrel, whose speed he suddenly checked and finally stopped. Wild Kate had lassoed the infuriated horse with a dexterity which any plainsman would envy. Thank Heaven! the runaway steed was captured, and its rider saved, all without harm!

A few moments later Walter Raymun and his friends had joined them, with congratulations of the highest satisfaction. Rock Randel, too, appeared upon the scene, he having seen the race and fell in, though too late to effect any good.

"By Randel Rock! that war sun tall doin's, ye see! Didn't ther gal jess throw ther line now? beat ther Regulators all holler, wagh! An' ther mowstang o' hern ken jess git up an' dust, yer bet! equal to ther Dead Duellist's roan, when he war on a rampage!"

Though pretty severely exhausted and somewhat frightened, Alice soon recovered from the effects of her wild ride, and was ready to return. Not deeming her thoroughly aroused horse safe for her, the equipage was quickly changed to Range's trained sorrel, and she was assisted upon his back. Repairing as best he could the broken bridle, Hart did not hesitate to mount the nervous brute, when the little cavalcade was ready to start.

"What's Kate gone?" asked Rock.

Sure enough; she had quietly withdrawn, and no trace of her was to be seen.

"Strange being!" muttered Range, almost disappointed, why, he could not himself tell. Then the party moved on in silence, each revolving in mind the thrilling events of the last hour.

They had not progressed far, however, when suddenly a cry of astonishment burst from Austen Warner's lips, and he exclaimed, in a startling tone:

"Look! for God's sake, what is that?"

A low, musical laugh rung upon the air as the others glanced just to the right of their course. Good Heaven! every face showed its amazement as a light-robed form upon a milk-white horse, steed and rider seeming to have arisen from the earth, slowly glided across their path, within three rods' space!

CHAPTER XII.

CHASING A PHANTOM—TEN SECONDS TO LIVE!

In mute amazement the little party stared upon the strange apparition which had so suddenly and mysteriously appeared upon the scene. Slowly and silently it moved over the plain, and as it passed beyond them the robe was slightly lifted, when an arm was extended, seeming to beckon them on. No one had thought or cared to challenge the singular rider, looking so much like a being from the supernatural world.

Warne, the first to recover his self-possession, cried: "That is a mystery worth solving. I am going to follow it, be it angel or demon!" and the reckless fellow wheeled his horse, determined to pursue the phantom-like form.

"Don't!" gasped Rock, trembling with a superstitious dread: "it am a spook, sartin, an' speerits ar' orful when they ar' mad, so jess let the Old Scratch git!"

"More's the fun if it's a ghost," answered the other. "Say, boys, let Walter go on with Miss Raymun, while we follow that, and see what it is."

"Oh, God!" cried Rock, his superstition fast getting the best of him, "don't! don't! We shall all be kilt! This spook-fightin' am death bizness! the fun am all the t'other side! I tell ye, boys, this 'coon hes hed some 'sperience, he hes, wagh!"

"See!" continued the excited collegian, not heeding Rock's interruption, "it still moves away, and will soon be out of sight."

"Come on, Rock!" said Hart, who had been a silent watcher; "I am as anxious to know what that means as Mr. Warne. Walter will excuse our company I know, as he and Miss Raymun can have no difficulty in returning to the grounds. There will be certainly no harm, if it results in no good."

Prompted by curiosity's strong and headlong impulse, the trio were soon riding cautiously upon the specter's course; but not without many misgivings

upon the part of Dandy Rock, who, in spite of his fears, was fain to join in the hazardous enterprise.

In silence, the three kept in pursuit of the mysterious rider, which in defiance of their endeavors to the contrary seemed to remain the same distance ahead. Increase their speed and the other would do likewise; maneuver as best they could, and they were just so far away—no nearer, no further. Puzzled, and angry with themselves, more than once they were determined to turn back; but something still prompted them forward.

Almost unconsciously they continued on, till the border of the Red Lands was reached. Then, suddenly, the apparition, or whatever it was, paused, when, elated at their seeming success, they pressed forward, and were about to hail, as it darted on into the Black Gulch. Hart Range half-raised his rifle as if to fire, then thinking better of it, he dashed ahead, the others keeping close to him.

Into the narrow pass-way of the "Gulch," hemmed in on one side by massive boulders, and the other by a perpendicular cliff of from fifteen to twenty feet in height, flashed the white rider, instantly disappearing around an angle of the ledge. In mad pursuit, the others recklessly followed.

Midway in the defile, and their passage, was suddenly blocked by fierce, determined men, with presented arms. Then a deafening crash succeeded, when a huge stone was toppled from the top of the crag into their path behind, cutting off all retreat!

"Stand!" a hoarse voice thundered, while the muzzles of rifles emphasized the demand. The little cavalcade was forced to rein in their startled horses, Hart and Rock in front abreast, Austen Warne just back—all facing death, hemmed in on every side! squarely trapped!

"Ha-ha, boys!" laughed the speaker, a dark-skinned, oily-visaged Mexican, with a low-browed countenance half-hidden under a greasy-looking, slouched sombrero, "hold them still, or riddle their carcasses with bullets!"

"What means this?" cried Hart, calmly, in spite of his peril.

"*Cuapita!* There is little need of telling," replied the Mexican. "In spite of your cunning, I've trapped you, Tiger of Taos! And the long-haired dog of an American is at last mine!"

"My heavens!" ejaculated Dandy Rock, suddenly turning pale, "is that San Mullre, or his dead spook?"

"Ha!" the other fairly screamed, his eyes gleaming like balls of fire, "it is I, San Mullre, whom you thought you killed in the Rio Bute a year ago. But I have lived to get you in my power once more; and this time there is to be no slip. For every pang I have suffered at your hands, you shall endure ten-fold!"

"Heave ahead, old Greaser! I 'low you hev rung a cold deal on us, jess by ther sneakin' speerit! But I reckon Dandy Rock dies game!"

During these hasty remarks the keen eyes of Range had taken a careful survey of their surroundings, but not a single avenue of escape was open to them. There was no retreat, and the men in front were cool and unflinching; though armed to the teeth their weapons were useless. Still with a dogged determination, Rock and he maintained their courage. Warne, while unacquainted with warfare, betrayed no visible emotion.

"What are you waiting for?" asked Range, unconcernedly, as the Mexican paused, silently watching them; "this position is getting to be monotonous. Proceed with your operations, or state your business, if you intend this meeting for such."

"Curse you!" exclaimed the other, bitterly, vexed at Hart's coolness and apparent indifference; "don't you see I am enjoying your fate?"

A pleasant enjoyment it must be to you in your cowardly warfare upon peaceful and inoffensive citizens! I know not who you are, or for what purpose you have led us into this trap; but I do know that, unless you allow us to depart in peace, it will be the dearest day's work you ever did!"

"Fool! you forget your master! Had I sought your life, I should not have dallied here. I do not wish you to die, but to live!"

"It matters not to me! 'tis all the same!" replied Hart, coolly.

Despite his efforts to conceal it, the Mexican's anger was fast rising, as he continued:

"But the Tiger had better be careful how he wags his tongue, for his life is in my hands to do with as I choose. Still, if he is as wise as he is bold, he will agree to my terms and have no trouble. Would he hear them?"

Finding that neither of the trio deigned to offer any reply to his speech, Mullre went on:

"The gentleman in the rear is a stranger to me, and I have nothing against him, therefore he can depart without harm at once. As for you, Tiger of Taos, our band needs you. The captain has had his eye on you since you left 'the valley.' Throw down your weapons, come forward and swear allegiance to us, and you shall be respected as second in our command. Refuse, and you die, die! As for the long-haired coyote, he knows already his fate. Nothing can save him! I will give you two minutes to decide in; then if you are foolhardy enough to decline my fair offers, you shall perish by the slowest of tortures with Rock Randel!"

"Cowardly Greaser!" cried Hart, fiercely, "think you that I care enough for life to desert a true friend, and become one of your accursed horde? As far as I am concerned spare your waiting! 't would be a waste of breath and a loss of time. Do your worst; I defy you!"

"Fire, men, when I say 'ten,' unless one or both accept my terms!" spoke San Mullre, without heeding the defiant declaration, otherwise than with a scowl of hatred; and then, in a slow, measured tone,

he commenced to count, the sound of his voice falling upon a fearfully oppressive stillness!

"One—two—three—four—five—six—seven—eight—"

CHAPTER XIII.

WILD KATE TO THE RESCUE.

"Nt—"

Ere the Mexican could give the word utterance, a coil of rope came whirling through the air, and hanging for an instant over their heads, dropped spitefully down upon the shoulders of the bandit leader and his nearest man standing so close to him; then quick hands jerked taut the line, when the desperadoes were hurled back to the earth. A shrill cry, the clatter of horses' hoof-strokes, and they were snatched over the ground's rough surface, till the cord suddenly parted, when they lay in lifeless heaps.

Surprised and startled, the remaining two forgot their duty, and hurriedly glanced about them.

Time for our friends to act. Drawing their weapons hastily, they spurred forward, and dashed safely out of the fearful trap without shedding a drop of blood.

From the top of the cliff rung hoarse shrieks and shouts, while a few harmless shots were fired.

The four outlaws in the pass had not been alone then, for others were rushing down from the craggy steep. But there was little to fear from them, and their course seemed clear, as the hardy trio rode through the growth, and finally galloped down by the border of the plain, steering away for Chesterville. Where was their deliverer? In vain they watched for some trace of him.

"By Randel Rock!" cried that worthy, enthusiastically, as they slackened their speed a trifle, "who'd 'a' thought it?"

"It was a narrow escape!" ejaculated Hart; "but where can our friends have gone so quickly? We owe to them our lives, and perhaps they are in trouble! Boys, we are acting like cowards now! We—"

At this juncture Wild Kate was seen a short distance down the forest, frantically beckoning them on.

"Can it have been she who gave us such opportune aid?" exclaimed Warne, as they dashed forward, soon reaching the strange, wild-wood heroine, sitting upon her spotted mustang, holding the piece of a broken lasso in her hand, while she impatiently awaited their approach.

"I am indeed thankful you have all escaped," was the wail's greeting; "I was afraid you would not be able to clear them."

"What!" cried Hart, "is it to you we owe our lives? and alone! You have our sincerest thanks—ay, our gratitude knows no bounds, for it was the narrowest escape I ever saw! Another moment and you would have been too late! but you were in the nick of time, and—"

"There, there, Mr. Range, you have said quite enough!" interrupted Kate. "It is true, I lassoed the Mexican and his companion, just for fun! but who couldn't have done it? I guess their heads will be sore to-morrow the way Lightfoot dragged them off. But they can thank my lasso for breaking, and be grateful that it's no worse."

"Jeems Stoppie!" exclaimed Rock, in an undertone, "if that gal ain't a screamer! 'Twa'n't fer the old woman, I'd be fer sparkin' her!"

"But how did you know of our capture?" asked Hart; "and how did you manage your part so successfully, for, if I do say it, that was the cleverest piece of business I have seen for years!"

"I suppose you would all sit there like staring idiots and ply me with questions, till the outlaws gobbled up the whole lot of you again, and then, like the fool I am, I should have to go to work and get you away, or the vultures would have a feast! But if you must know how I discovered your captivity, and effected your release, I will tell you as we ride back to Chesterville, for thereby hangs a moral, so you may learn a lesson, and not run into such a trap again, like a pack of hungry curs."

"After leaving you upon Chester Plain," Kate commenced, as the last sound of the outlaws had been left in the distance, and they lessened the pace of their horses to a walk, "I started back for the picnic, riding in the edge of the timber. I had not gone far, however, when I saw the white rider, which so interested you and was the cause of your trouble. At first glance the spectral form startled me; but as it rode by without offering molestation, I soon recovered, though amazement instantly succeeded fright. As it glided past its robe caught upon the branches of a tree, and the booted foot of a man appeared full in sight! Wondering what any one was doing up in that toggery for, but thinking it was for sport rather than mischief, I gave it but little notice, and kept on. Still after a while it suddenly occurred to me that he was riding directly toward you; and then a thought came to my mind that perhaps it was a decoy sent out to lure some one into danger. Quickly turning my mustang I rode back to find you following the specter decoy. Knowing that no good could come of it, I pressed on in pursuit; but before I could warn you the trap was sprung. Perfectly familiar with the Black Gulch and its surroundings, I realized in a moment your situation; and knowing too, the bloodthirsty character of your foes, and their deadly hate, felt that it was only by prompt and decisive action I could save you. It was with less difficulty than might be supposed that I succeeded in cautiously working Lightfoot around the cliff, as the bandits' whole attention was taken up in dealing with you. As soon as near enough, partially hidden from view by the angle of the ledge, I used my lasso successfully, and you did the rest."

Wild Kate, true to her nature, would take no praise for the daring part she had acted. But, perhaps un-

consciously, positively unexpectedly, she had won by her noble bravery and unselfish heroism from one of that little party of three a feeling of more than admiration. Ay, we guess, too, who it was!

The arrival of our friends was hailed with delight, for their non-appearance had created considerable alarm, and volunteers were about starting in search for them.

Pleasantly passed the remainder of the day, and the picnic was a thing of the past—another bright spot in the career of Shelby, which its pleasure-lovers long kept vivid by frequent recollections.

A messenger from South-west Bend came to Chesterville that night for aid to grapple with a furious outbreak which had suddenly embroiled her citizens in what was expected to be a bloody time. A dozen of the Regulators under the lead of one True Bill, had left at once for the scene of the riots, hoping to quell the uprising.*

Immediately after returning from his adventure in the Black Gulch, Hart Range had sought the Prairie Home. It had been an eventful day to him in more ways than one.

"To-night I must do my work, and then leave Shelby," he said to himself. But from what followed it would truly seem as if Fate was against him or his mission, for, after lounging around the tavern a few hours, though he was seldom if ever seen to partake of the "poison" so freely retailed over Killhurn's counter, he began to show unmistakable signs of intoxication, and toward night, much as we despise the act and hate to acknowledge the deed, it was evident that he was *beastly drunk*!

CHAPTER XIV.

HART RANGE'S MISSION—BURIED SECRETS.

Not till late in the evening did Hart Range leave the Prairie Home; in fact, that was as soon as he was able to travel with anything like ease or steadiness. Then, as the last loafer left, and Killhurn was shutting up for the night, he wandered off in the direction of Colonel Raymun's hacienda, his eyes ever and anon glancing furtively about him, as if fearing that spying eyes were watching his movements.

A few minutes' hurried walk and the colonel's home was reached. The invigorating air had so revived Hart that he showed but little signs of his late debauch. Still a latent fire burned in his eyes, and he was extremely nervous. Ay, he was on his mission! Had he drank the whisky to nerve himself for the ordeal? and then under its potent influence was seeking to wreak the work of a hidden vengeance?

Around, everything was silent, appearing as if the inmates were all wrapped in the quiet of repose, but the faint glimmer of a light from a distant window seemed to show that all had not retired for the night. Five minutes later:

"Please be seated, Mr. Range," said the colonel in his affable way, as he ushered him into the library.

"Excuse me, Colonel Raymun, for troubling you at this unseemly hour, but business—important business, which concerns you and me; so preyed upon my mind that I could not sleep."

"Certainly, certainly, Mr. Range. You say business which relates to both of us, pray proceed; I am entirely at liberty."

Not failing to notice the other's strangely impetuous tone, and uneasiness of manner, he was perplexed to know what this untimely visit meant.

"Colonel Raymun!" exclaimed Hart, abruptly, in a fierce, excited voice, fixing his piercing eyes upon the other with a fitful glare, "I've come for vengeance!"

"For what?" gasped the suddenly startled man, springing to his feet as if shot.

"For vengeance!" repeated the other. "The blood of a father cries for justice!"

"Who—what are you?" demanded the colonel, appearing more and more amazed; "an escaped lunatic?"

"Pray be seated, colonel; you will need all your strength for the ordeal."

"Explain yourself, Hart Range, or leave my house at once!"

"You act your part well, colonel; but you shall have your explanations. Don't you recognize me?"

"Only as a madman!" he answered, slowly and mechanically sinking back into his chair, while great beads of perspiration oozed out upon his brow as he realized the fearful storm brewing.

"You remember Walter Clifford. I am his son!"

"Impossible!"

"It is a fact, nevertheless; and I accuse you, Arthur Hart, of being my father's murderer!"

"Oh, God! have mercy!" cried Col. Raymun, his face of an ashen hue, and a terrible convulsion shaking his form. An instant and he had changed from a strong, defiant man to a groveling wretch. It could not have been the mere assertion, menacing as it was, but some irrepressible emotion which had so strangely and fearfully affected him.

"Did you show mercy when you struck down in cold blood the truest friend you ever had?"

"I did not mean it! Oh, spare me! spare me!"

"Then you do not deny the crime?"

"I killed him! I know it! But, oh, merciful Heaven! spare me for my children's sake!"

"No, no, Arthur Hart, or Colonel Raymun as the world knows you now; the deed was too dark, and the wound was too deep to be forgiven and forgotten! Justice shall have its due! I, his son, say it!"

*It was about this time that the "Regulator Wars" originated, which so ravaged Shelby; and this outbreak was one of the sparks which kindled into a blaze the whole country.

"Pity me! oh, pity me!" groaned the stricken man, burying his face in his hands.

"Fool!" exclaimed Hart, contemptuously, "you are not fit to be called a man! But, I would ask you a few questions. Will you answer?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Alice, they tell me, is not your daughter. Whose child is she?"

"I do not know. I found her on Chester Plain when but a babe."

"Could you never find any trace of her parentage?"

"No, except a locket and chain; the first containing a lady's portrait, the picture of her mother, I think, as she has a decided resemblance to it. The locket also bears the letters W. to A. She must have been the daughter of some settler or immigrant, from whom the Indians probably stole her, and then tiring of their rather troublesome charge left her to perish on the plain. But I have cared for her as tenderly and anxiously as if she was my own. In fact, she seemed a God-send to partially fill the void caused by the sudden and mysterious disappearance of my own darling, Eda."

"Then you had another child?" asked Range, in surprise.

"Yes; a lovely daughter. But when scarce twelve months old she was taken from us, not by disease, but by an unknown fate! No trace of her have we ever been able to find! I know I have sinned heavily, but, oh, Hart Range! I have suffered as fearfully! You cannot realize the agony I have endured. But for my family I could not have borne up as I have! Now, after these long years, you will expose me, and overwhelm them with sorrow and disgrace!"

"Dastard!" cried Hart, his rage fast getting beyond his control; "in your weakness you forget the wrongs you have done me and mine. The murdered father, the grief-stricken mother, the wrecked home, all demand that justice shall do its duty; and I have not hunted you so long to allow you to escape now. No, Arthur Hart! you shall meet at last the punishment you have so many years averted."

"For my wife and children's sake, spare me! Oh, pity them! Believe me, it was a mistake! I—"

"Liar!" shrieked Hart, growing wilder and fiercer, his eyes blazing like balls of fire, and his complexion of a livid hue, with a deathly whiteness around the mouth. "I have a mind to kill you! I will!" and like a madman he drew his knife and sprung upon the frightened and cowering form.

Unknown to either Colonel Raymun or Hart Range, two pairs of eyes had seen every move which had been made, and as many ears had heard every word that had been spoken; and as the infuriated avenger leaped upon his victim, a couple of light forms bounded through the window, when Walter Raymun and Austen Warne hurled themselves upon him.

In the fierce struggle which ensued, the would-be murderer was torn from his object; but turning upon his adversaries he quickly threw them off, and from blows dealt with lightning-like rapidity he felled them to the floor like stricken beasts.

"You will soon hear from me again, Colonel Raymun!" he cried, and then, rushing out of the house, he sprang into his saddle, riding swiftly away.

CHAPTER XV.

NEW ACTORS IN THE DRAMA—MORE STARTLING EVENTS AT RAYMUN RANCH—ANOTHER BLOW FROM HART RANGE.

NIGHT still hung over Shelby.

Away upon Chester Plain two horsemen were riding toward Chesterville. Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour they rode leisurely, for they had ridden far that day, and belated, were still pressing slowly on to reach their destination, rather than bivouac on the prairie.

Under the dim light of the star-lit heavens it might have been seen that both were men hardly past the prime of life, still hale and vigorous. Both were quite tall, straight and strong-limbed; both were dressed in suits of hunting-shirt and leggings of buckskin, beaded and frilled; one wore his hair shortly cropped, and his manly face was cleanly shaven, all in true mountain style; the other's dark hair, slightly tinged with gray, fell about his neck and shoulders, while he wore a full, untrimmed yet handsome beard. The first was Gilman Reynolds, "old Gil Rey" the veteran mountaineer, whose two score and a half of years of wild life on the plains and in the mountains had scarcely left an imprint upon his brow. The other was the well-known guide and ranger, Hard Cliff, the hero of wide-spread notoriety, whose prowess as Indian scout and trapper was second to none on the border. Ever the champion of right and justice, always acting with cool and quick decision, the lawless invaders who so cursed the Texan frontier had found in him a powerful and dreaded foe. Though his name had often been heard connected with some deed of valor, he was a stranger in Shelby county. But Gil Rey we have met there before; on the trail of subtle foes we have seen his skill tested and his courage tried.

"You say, Gil, we are almost there. Oh! how anxious I am! Can it be possible I shall find one of them at last, after so many, many years?"

"Have patience a little longer, cap'en; we will soon be there."

"You say she is quite tall, has blue eyes and golden hair?"

"Yes, Cap; an' a real beauty with the sunniest smile and sweetest voice a purty gal ever had."

"My Ally's own image! You are sure she is not this gentleman's daughter?"

"Sartin! Hev known Colonel Raymun an' his

family fur yurs. Alice am a child he found on the plain when but a wee tot of a babe. But she has had a good home."

"God bless Colonel Raymun for that! But, after all, we may be mistaken! What if we should be! The disappointment after my sudden hope will be worse than the sorrow I have suffered for these eighteen long and weary years, spent in one continual search for the lost ones! Still something seems to tell me that I am now on the right track, that at last my work will receive its reward. Ah, faithful friend, little do you know the anguish of a bereaved father's heart, or the joyous anticipation he feels in expecting to clasp in his arms once more his long-lost darling!"

"We've chipped the right trail, I know we hev! an' soon you will see yer darter, for es true es I live, thar is the colonel's hacienda. He owns all this kentry! He's a heap the biggest 'coon in Chesterville!"

"Thank God that we are almost there, and I shall soon see her! I know the colonel will forgive us for calling at this hour, for I could not wait longer. Oh, how impatient I am to know the truth!"

As the twain rode through the grove in front of the house, they heard hoof-strokes, and thought they saw the glimpse of a party of horsemen galloping across the corner of the plain to the west. But frantic cries of terror and distress from the dwelling caused them to quickly dash forward, realizing that something was wrong; and as they reached the house, they dismounted and rushed in, every door in the building seeming ajar.

As our intrepid friends entered the hall, groans and cries of pain issued from an inner apartment; and when they bounded through the entrance, they caught sight of a prostrate form on the floor, weltering in blood, and, good Heaven! bending over his victim, barely past the act of his fiendish work, stood the assassin, still clutching the haft of his fatal bowie.

With a haggard, startled look, the surprised wretch started back; but ere he could escape, Gil Rey and his companion threw themselves upon him, and he was secured almost without a struggle.

With the ready material they found, in the shape of a lasso which Hard Cliff always carried upon his person, it was but the work of a moment to firmly bind the captive.

"Reckon that'll cool his narves!" cried Gil Rey, as they turned to the fallen man.

"Good God, Hard Cliff! 'tis Colonel Raymun!"

"Too true! and his murderer, captured and bound, was Hart Range!"

"D'ye think he'll go under?" asked the mountaineer, anxiously, as they examined and carefully dressed the colonel's wound, no one else as yet appearing on the scene.

In reply his companion slowly shook his head, as if not daring to utter the simple negative, for the blow had driven the steel deep, and he feared, feared—

"What is that?" asked Gil, suddenly, as a slight noise was heard in the room for the second time. Then, they discovered a man in the corner, bound and gagged! It was Austen Warne!

"More o' the pesky varmint's business!" exclaimed Gil Rey, as he quickly freed the other from his uncomfortable position.

"Can you tell us what this all means?" asked Cliff.

"Yes, yes," answered Warne, as soon as he had recovered his speech; "there has been a fearful time. We had all retired, and were asleep, when, suddenly, we were aroused from our slumber by a body of armed men in the house. They had entered boldly, and commenced plundering everything they considered of sufficient value. Of course we offered resistance, and in the fierce struggle which we made they soon overpowered us. Then they continued their robbery, leaving just before you came. Their leader, the villain you have bound here, not satisfied with the hellish work he had already perpetrated, stopped behind to add murder to his list of crimes. Helpless to offer opposition or cry for help, I saw him strike the colonel down before my own eyes. But I pray to God that your timely arrival prevented him from making a fatal blow, though the ruffian is none the less entitled to hanging!"

Austen Warne was right; it had been a fearful time. The peons were found huddled together in the kitchen, half frightened out of their wits. Mrs. Raymun had been served the same as our collegian. But search high and low, no trace could be discovered of Walter and Alice!

Where could they be? Either dead or in the hands of the night-marauders!

"How menny war thar o' the cussid gang?" queried Gil Rey, as they returned to the library, where they had left their prisoner.

"A dozen or more," replied Austen; "and a brutal set they were, too."

"Some of the old Red Land outlaws, probably. But what could they have ag'in' the colonel?"

"It was this rascal, their leader! He had trouble with the colonel, and only to-night, Walter Raymun and myself heard him swear that he would kill the other."

"Wal, I reckon—"

Suddenly the prisoner, Hart Range, was seen to leap to his feet. He had burst or undid his bonds, and was free! Quick as thought the three men sprung forward to intercept and recapture him. As well to chain the mountain hurricane!

The two rangers were lithe, active men, like the panther in their movements, and the collegian was no sluggard. But like lightning the desperate young avenger sprang to his feet, and as the others reached him, a quick blow dealt with either hand, and Warne measured his length on the floor, while Hard Cliff was hurled back against the wall. Then, with

a single bound, he burst through the window out into the open air.

Gil Rey, snatching his rifle from its position near the door, rushed out just as Range was springing upon the back of his horse, which had been standing near by. The mountaineer afterward recalled to mind that it was with the greatest difficulty the other could mount his saddle; still he did not heed it at the time, but hastily raising his rifle, he fired at the retreating form. A sharp cry of pain followed, and Hart Range reeled to and fro in his saddle as if he would fall from his seat. Then he pitched forward upon the steed's neck, an arm falling upon either side of the animal's neck. A snort and a bound, which came near throwing its rider, and the fleet sorrel bore him away like the wind.

CHAPTER XVI.

ON A SCOUT—THE DEAD RIDER.

No attempt was made to follow Hart Range, for it would have merely been a waste of time; besides, there was no one to spare.

"Let him go," said Gil Rey, "I reckon, cap'en, you an' me'll take their trail an' we'll hunt him down, or git throwed, wagh!"

Colonel Raymun was still in a sort of stupor, faint from the loss of blood. His wound, though painful and quite dangerous, was not thought likely to prove fatal. Austen Warne, who was well versed in medicine and surgery, stood by his couch all the remainder of the night, caring as tenderly for him as if he had been his own father. Mrs. Raymun, nearly overcome with grief and anxiety, also watched by her husband's side. Hard Cliff and Gil Rey had sought rest, for they had decided to take the outlaws' trail in the morning, to try and rescue the helpless ones in peril.

Toward morning the people of the village, to whom the news of the eventful night had flown, flocked around, anxious and excited. Among them came Rock Randel, the Regulator chief; and the meeting between him and his friend, the mountaineer and ex-Regulator, was cordial and hearty.

It would seem as if the bandits had purposely selected an opportune time for their depredation. All the men that could be well spared had gone to South-west Bend, and there were not enough left to properly defend the settlement, much less send a squad on the war-path. But Gil Rey had declared it would be better for scouts to proceed on the trail, and perhaps ferret out the freebooters ready for attack as soon as the Rangers returned from the Bend.

Accordingly he and Hard Cliff at early dawn mounted their horses, and rode away for the Red Lands, where it was supposed without doubt the abductors were rendezvoused. The following morning Rock and Austen Warne, providing the colonel should not be considered in too much danger, would meet one or both at the Black Gulch, and then—well, coming events would decide that.

Leaving those at home, we will follow the varying fortunes of our hardy scouts in their adventurous undertaking.

After leaving the Raymun hacienda the two friends were soon riding at a smart gallop across the plains toward the Red Lands, passing near the line of *chaparral* north of the Prairie Home, and steering for a point just south of the Black Gulch, for we know Gil Rey was familiar with every inch of the country.

Half an hour's ride, and nothing had occurred to break its monotony. Hard Cliff, disappointed at a moment when non-success was a blow hard to bear, and anxious for the captive's fate, as knowing well her peril, thus suffering a two-fold suspense, was silent and thoughtful, while pressing swiftly on for the work in hand. But a quick exclamation suddenly aroused him to a sense of his surroundings.

"My Lord, cap'en! look! thar kems the chap I shot last night arter he kerfummuxed us so pert! He's a dead coyote, sure!"

The unexpected appearance of a horseman had caught the old mountaineer's attention; and no wonder his exclamation of discovery was followed with the speech we have given, for as the person drew nearer—his horse bearing him on at a listless pace—he proved to be a strange equestrian.

Of a dark sorrel, the steed was instantly recognized as the one belonging to Hart Range; and its rider was hanging upon its back in the same position as when he escaped his foes at Col. Raymun's the night before. His body was still bent forward upon the horse's neck, his head lying on its mane, with an arm stretching down either side—all seeming lifeless!

Though wandering at his will, now stopping to clip a mouthful of grass, then starting into a sluggish trot, and anon slackening to a walk, the horse with its singular burden, whether a living man, a dead body, or a dummy, was slowly but surely approaching.

Puzzled, the scouts awaited its coming. But, ere it reached them, or came near enough to be fairly distinguished in the morning light, for it was still dawn, the animal, as if suddenly noticing them, turned and galloped away in an opposite direction, the form threatening to topple from its seat at every bound.

"Shall we foller?" asked Gil.

"No," answered Cliff, who could think of naught else but the captive maiden, "not now. We must press on to rescue her."

"Right, cap'en! Excuse me, but I didn't like ter see that hoss totting that ar' body round so. Howsumdover, es ye say, we hain't got nary time to spend in foolishnesses."

Again they were moving on, faster than ever, to gain what they had lost by their delay.

An hour after sunrise the Red Lands were reach-

ed at a place not far from the Black Gulch; then turning northward the friends followed up the border of the wild waste's stunted growth, hoping to find the spot where the outlaws had entered its recesses. Not far had they gone, however, when they discovered the newly-made hoof-prints of some half-dozen horses which had passed there but a few hours before. Knowing they must have been made by a party of the banditti, they decided to follow the trail.

With extreme caution, and often at great disadvantage, the scouts slowly followed the circuitous course designated by the irregular line of hoof-strokes, which at times made in soft earth were easy to detect; and then for rods and rods only the merest trace of them could be found. Still with determined perseverance the trackers pressed on.

At last the valley of the Rio Burte was reached, and knowing their horses were liable to betray them to some of the prowling desperadoes, if any were around, and finding they were a detriment not an advantage, a place was selected where they were tethered and left in a sort of glade, where the thick foliage of the undergrowth surrounding hid them completely from all outside view. Then, with less difficulty and greater celerity, they again traced the trail of their foes.

Across the sluggish stream they found the hoof-marks without trouble; and through tangled underbrush, around huge boulders, and over long stretches of unswayed earth they followed on for a couple of miles, when suddenly coming upon more elevated land, which seemed made of one continual ledge of rock, the unshod feet of the horses had left no further indications of the direction of their continued progress. Though baffled for the time, the rangers did not despair, and soon ascending a higher ridge or sort of plateau, covered here and there with patches of dwarf oak, they took a careful survey of the country surrounding.

To the south and east nothing interposed with the dreary expanse of the Red Lands, save a green line extending half-way round on the outer edge, where Chester Plain shone upon the panoramic scene, like sheen banding darkness. But ahead a cliff of nearly twenty feet in height, with one side perpendicular, and the other sloping back until it came on a level with its encircling base, cut off all further view. A short distance to the right, and sounding below them, could be heard the roaring of a mad flood of water, which must be the Rio Burte, not a placid stream here but a cataract of rapids.

Advancing toward the sounds a few rods the twain suddenly found themselves upon the brink of a precipice, eighteen or twenty feet below which the waters dashed over piles of loose stones and huge boulders, while beating in angry waves the stony walls of the narrow and crooked canyon till lashed into fury, the foaming stream rushed on its headlong course. But a second discovery quickly succeeded. At the base of the bluff, following along to the edge of the abyss, was a plainly-marked foot-path; and down where the ledge connected with the nearly perpendicular side of the canyon, was a sort of shelf or projection, well designed for a natural passage, and constituted the continuance of the pathway, which kept on till it turned an abrupt angle of the cliff.

"By Joe Smith!" exclaimed Gil Rey, after a moment, "this am jess whar Rock Randel had his scrimmage with the Greaser, last yur; an' I'll bet my tooth-pick the stealin' varmints hev got their den within the shoot of my rifle!"

"It is more than probable," replied Cliff; "but we are running too much risk to continue our operations by daylight, so let's go back to the valley, and get what rest we can this afternoon; then to-night we will ferret out the banditti, or I don't know my name."

"Agreed!" answered the mountaineer; and soon they were silently threading their way back to the horses, which they found had been undisturbed.

The sun had passed the meridian, and day soon turned to night, when again the gallant scouts were on the trail of their hated foes, with perils hemming them in on every side.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN HOUR OF PERIL.

APPEARING in the dim starlight of the partially obscured heavens more like phantoms than real beings, the scouts silently yet swiftly threaded the dark aisles of the somber forest; gliding on till at last the plateau was reached, and again they were standing upon the brink of the Rio Burte canyon. Nothing thus far had disturbed their progress; but now came the work.

Carefully, and not without considerable trepidation, Gil Rey slowly followed the narrow and extremely dangerous passway which wound around the base of the cliff, and hung so precariously over the mad, foaming river. A single misstep and his life would be the forfeit. But others had gone over the very same place before him, and the intrepid mountaineer did not hesitate to do likewise. Hard Cliff was keeping guard and waiting for him above.

Around the angle Gil soon made his way; then he found the passage led out upon a platform where it was met by the solid ledge. Ay, his trouble had been in vain! their discovery had vanished in air! After a thorough examination of the massive front, he was forced to acknowledge himself baffled. But, why had the way been traveled so far, if it did not continue further? Still that seemed impossible, and disappointed, he turned back to seek his companion.

Reaching his comrade in safety, the scout hurriedly apprised him of the fruitlessness of their en-

deavors. A short consultation, and it was decided to pass around to the other side of the bluff.

Retracing their steps a short distance, the trackers were soon gaining the back side of the cliff. Suddenly they saw what the heights had heretofore hidden from them; and the scene so abruptly brought before their vision was unexpectedly wild and rugged. Stretching away for half a mile, partly hemmed in by crags and bluffs, was a sort of ravine or gully—the stone-bound and rock-bottomed basin of the Red Lands. Away to the right could be heard the swish and roar of a waterfall.

"Wal, by the United States' Government! ef this ar' hain't the stompin'-ground o' the varmints we ar' arter, then 'tain't 'cause it moughtn't be!" exclaimed the mountaineer, in a low tone.

"If their rendezvous is anywhere here, with God's help, we will know it within an hour," declared Cliff, as he moved forward.

Slowly and with extreme caution the scouts advanced, searching with piercing eyes every nook and cranny, while the ears were listening for any indication of danger. Without interruption or any discovery, they reached the middle of the valley or gorge. Then, an abrupt pause, and for good reasons, too. They had suddenly come upon a hard path, winding its course in and out among the huge boulders and fallen trees. But not a moment was given them for reflection, as, at that instant, a horseman was heard coming down the stony way, fast approaching them.

"Hist! this way! Quick, or we are lost!" whispered Cliff, and they hastily crossed the pass, to seek the shelter of a rim of wild sage bushes that other side.

The twain had barely secured concealment when an apparition suddenly burst into view scarcely two rods ahead! From around a turn the horseman had flashed into sight, and, good Heaven! brave as the two men were, forgetting their perils, they could not help trembling at the first glance they caught of the spectral form. A milk-white steed bearing a rider shrouded in a raiment of the same hue!

With bated breath, the scouts saw the white rider advance; but as it came nearer and their danger increased they grew calmer, though it was not without a nervous dread that they beheld the singular being ride so near to them that with an outstretching of an arm they could have easily touched its flowing robe. Still, man or demon, it rode on, unconscious of the gleaming eyes glaring from the thicket. It reached—it passed them, and with a long-drawn breath of relief, the scouts watched intently the fast receding form.

"Come, cap'en, let's foller the—"

"Silence, Gil! more are coming!"

True. The quick ear of the ranger had detected sounds of other hoof-strokes, coming from the same direction as the spectral rider. Were these phantoms like the first? Silently, and with fearful forebodings, they listened and waited.

Surely they heard horsemen approaching, but as there were more than one the sounds were confused. What of that? Nothing. Hold! there was something, for it seemed as if a part were coming in front and the others to their rear!

Glancing hurriedly back they saw to their dismay there was another path just behind them running parallel with the other. Along this way some of the approaching horsemen were coming, and though hidden from those in front, there was not a single rock or shrub to shield them from the gaze of these! Too late to cross either track for the protection which was back, they seemed lost! Already the cavalcade was close upon them—surrounding them!

Only one thing appeared to favor the friends; the party coming in front was a few rods ahead of the other; and screened from them by the growth of sage, they might possibly reach a clump of dwarf oak which grew by a pile of rocks a dozen yards to the left.

Noiselessly as shadows, they turned and crept forward toward the promised refuge. Two-thirds of the distance was made, and then the horsemen had passed the bend—were almost upon them! Oh, how swiftly their foes seemed approaching! though really only at a walk; and how slowly they were moving! Still a single rash or hasty effort, and life would pay the forfeit! Ha! they were lost! the other party were sweeping down the course at a smart gallop! With a feeling of despair, though never relaxing their wariness, the scouts dropped flat upon the earth, and dexterously glided for the thicket then only their length ahead. Would the foremost riders discover them? or, if not, would the others reach the spot too soon? An inevitable affirmative seemed to answer both! No! The scrub-oak was gained; its shade was theirs; and silent, breathless, apparently lifeless, they laid in its gloom and darkness.

Barely crouched in their covert and the scouts saw their foes ride down upon either side to pass within the length of their rifles! Then, to their surprise, they knew the paths coalesced just beyond; and judge of their consternation as at this junction both divisions in answer to a demand from some one in advance hastily drew rein!

"Silence!" commanded a quick, nervous voice; "dismount and lead your horses to the corral as quickly and quietly as possible. There are two spies somewhere in the gorge, and every man is needed to help hunt them out! Be lively, now! for your lives!"

Like a knell the words fell upon the ears of the concealed listeners. Fearful that even their low and almost inaudible breathing would betray their presence, the suspense was dreadful in that moment of peril. On leaden wings the moments seemed to hang!

A few words more of explanation, and the out-

laws, for such they doubtless were, quickly dismounted, and leading their animals away soon disappeared from sight.

"By gracious, cap'en!" exclaimed Gil, in an undertone, drawing a breath of relief, "that war a narrer squeak, sure! I reckon we'd better git, or the pesky varmints 'ull gobble us up! But how'd ther coyotes know we war hyar is wot sticks me!"

"Never mind, Gil, we have got on track of their den; and if we can elude them now, it will be a good night's work."

Assuring themselves that no enemy was in the immediate vicinity they carefully left the thicket and swiftly crossed the pathway, making for the shadow of a dense growth of brushwood clinging to the side of a crag which extended back toward the south for some distance.

None too soon were the scouts in their movement. Half a dozen bandits almost instantly broke upon the scene; and then in every direction could they hear their foes, sparing no crevice or corner in their eager search.

Men inured to hardships and dangers of every kind, whose very lives in fact were made of adventures, the rangers were perfectly calm and self-possessed. Knowing the peril of delay as well as the folly of rashness, they crept along under the overhanging bluff at tolerable speed. Though they could still plainly hear their trackers—and the valley seemed fairly alive with them—they were getting in advance of them, and after turning the angle of the cliff they hoped to soon reach a place of comparative safety.

"We shall escape the fiends in a moment," whispered Hard Cliff, who was in advance. But the words had hardly passed his lips, when he uttered a sharp, quick cry, and with a crash fell forward disappearing instantly from view!

Startled and amazed, Gil Rey paused. It was quite dark and impossible for him to comprehend the sudden movement of his companion. Still no time was given him for speculation. The shriek and noise had aroused the outlaws—had told them their exact locality—and from all quarters the desperadoes hurled themselves upon him, every bush and boulder every crag and gully seeming to emit a yelling demon!

CHAPTER XVII.

AT LAST!

AGAIN the sun shone on Shelby county.

'Twas the morning upon which Randal and Warne were to meet Hard Cliff and Gil Rey at the Sentinel Sycamore near the Black Gulch.

Agreeable to understanding, Dandy Rock had left his home long before daylight, to seek the Red Lands; but as Colonel Raymun was still very low—seemed on the point of death—it was thought best that Austen should stay to assist in care of him. Accordingly, the Regulator chief went alone, and thus we find him. No, excuse us, not alone!

Just as he had sighted the Red Lands, he suddenly saw the same mysterious horseman who had so puzzled the mountaineer and his companion the previous morning—the dead rider!

Rock had at first thought nothing strange, and challenged the man. But, receiving no answer, or even indication of having been heard, he slowly approached the singular centaur.

"By Randal Rock! it am the hoss belonging to the Tiger-from-Taos! Is thet him playin' 'possum?" and again he halted.

No reply was made. The face was hidden in the animal's mane, so that it was not visible; but the figure he saw resembled Hart Range.

Thoroughly puzzled the Regulator raised his rifle and commanded the other to speak or make some demonstration, under the penalty of death.

Still no answer was given by speech, though the chief fancied he saw the rider move; and as if touched by the spur the sorrel steed wheeled and galloped furiously away, the equestrian reeling to and fro as if he would fall to the earth at every bound.

Superstitious as we know the Ranger to be, he was really glad when the strange being had disappeared. "Ef it hadn't bin for wakin' up sumbody thet might make me trouble, I would hev fired," he muttered, as he lowered his rifle and rode on. "But what war it, ennyway? Sakes alive! I'll bet my top-knot it war a regular livin', tearin' spook! another Dead Duelist! Jeems Stopple! ye don't ketch this coon to look at him ag'in, much more p'int his shooter at him!" and the strong man trembled as he recalled to mind his fearful experience in hunting down the "Dead Rider of the Roan Steed!"

A few moments and the sycamore was reached, but no one was there to meet him! Where were Hard Cliff and Gil Rey? Would they fail to keep their appointment?

Anxiously the Regulator awaited their arrival. Thus an hour wore tediously away, and still they came not! Where were they? What should he do?

It seemed useless to tarry longer. Surely his friends were in trouble! Such being the case, there was work for him to do! and he must act before it should be too late! He had come to this conclusion, and was about to move on, when a cheery, musical voice suddenly startled him from his meditation.

"Well, sir Regulator chief! it seems you wait for your friends in vain!"

Turning about, Rock was astonished at beholding Wild Kate on her spotted mustang.

"Jeehoospat, Miss Kate! you s'prised me! But you ar' right; the boys don't put in nary a 'pearance!"

"And you don't know the reasons why?" partly-questioned, partly-replied the prairie queen.

"You hev jess chipped the trail, an' no mistook, Miss Kate! But ken you tell me whar they ar'?"

"I have ridden three leagues on purpose to tell

you; you need not wait here longer; they are in the hands of the outlaws!"

"Sho! ye don't say so! How kem they thar? Wal, the game's up!"

"They ran into a trap last night. You will hazard an unnecessary risk by continuing on further, as you cannot help them in that way. But return to Chesterville, get as many as you can to come with you, and be here at this tree at midnight, and I will guide you to the robbers' cave, when you can rescue your friends and rout out the banditti."

"But won't they rub out the boys and Miss Raymun afore then?"

"It's the best you can do. Remember what I have said, and be sure and be here by twelve o'clock to-night. Let the cry of the night-hawk repeated twice in rapid succession be our signal. God grant you success!" and she turned to ride out upon Chester Plain.

"Hol—hold on, Miss Kate!" suddenly cried Rock, when the fair rider drew rein and looked back inquiringly.

"Don't, don't go out that way! Thar's an orful spook on the plain! I jess see'd him, and he kem mighty nigh wringin' me out!"

"A ghost, Mr. Randal? You are joking! But have you seen that dead rider? If so, can you tell me what it means? Something dreadful has happened to Mr. Range!"

"Yes, Miss Kate; I jess see'd the dead rider, as you call it. It am the speerit o' the Tiger-from-Taos! Gil Rey throwed him cold, an' he don't rest well arter killin' Colonel Raymun! But, good Lord, Kate! don't go nigh him, fer speerits ar' orful when they ar' r'iled!"

"Are you a fool, Rock Randal?" exclaimed the dauntless maiden, almost contemptuously. "I propose to lasso the horse and learn the mystery of its rider. I am not afraid, if you are!"

"Jeems Stopple, Miss Kate! I vise ye ter jess keep cl'ar o' that critter! Mark my word, no good 'll kem o' yer meddlin' with it, see of thar does!"

With a laugh, Wild Kate rode on, leaving the Regulator chief in a rather uncomfortable state of mind.

"She's gone stark mad, sure!" ejaculated Rock to himself, after a pause. "I guess I'll jess slip up through the timber, an' see of thet spook don't wring a cold deal on her. Jerewselum! I feel like I war goin' inter a powder-mill! Why can't speerits rest an' not be troublin' 'em es never hurt 'em?"

With the words he rode forward through the growth, to carry out his well-meant intentions, in spite of the dread which possessed him. However, he had not gone far when a sudden cry for help caught his ear. It came from a point near at hand, and was soon repeated, plainer and more entreatingly. Then, low groans and moans of distress succeeded, as from one in the direst agony.

Thinking only that some poor mortal was in suffering and needed assistance, Rock quickly dismounted, and hurried to the spot, leaving his trained steed to stand at his will.

Guided by the continuing cries, the ranger reached the thicket, to discover the form of a man lying in the underbrush, writhing and twisting in the fearful contortions of pain.

"What's the trouble old hoss?" asked the Regulator, compassionately, as he bent forward to get a better view of the stricken man.

At that moment a quick whir-rr broke the stillness, while a lasso cleft the air, falling right by the side of Rock. Evidently it had been thrown for him, but the overhanging branch of a tree had caused it to fall short of its object. With a startled exclamation, Rock sprung back, just in season to see Sam Mullre, his most dreaded foe, and five or six others spring from their coverts! Ha! he realized in an instant what it all meant; an ambush had been laid for him, and the man pretending to be hurt had been a decoy!

The Mexican, furious at his failure of an easy capture, as he had expected, rushed upon the ranger, with revengeful cries, closely followed by his allies.

Acting with quick decision, Dandy Rock gave a wild yell of defiance, and dashed through the growth, reaching his horse at half a dozen bounds. Then, springing into his saddle, with the agility of a catamount, he buried the rowels deep into the sides of his steed, which, with a snort of pain, bore him swiftly away.

With maddened shrieks, his baffled foes discharged their rifles; but it was random firing, and the bullets flew wide of their mark. Rock, by a bold stroke for freedom was escaping, and would soon be far beyond their reach.

Triumphant, exultant, the Regulator chief was congratulating himself in his mind at his narrow, almost miraculous escape. But suddenly, even as he was thinking, his horse tripped upon the earth's uneven surface—he blundered—he staggered—and, in spite of Rock's frantic endeavors, fell headlong to the ground. With a dexterous movement, Randal freed his feet from the stirrups, but could not avert the fall which was inevitable. Then, ere he recovered the shock, the Mexican and his horde reached the spot, when he was quickly overpowered!

CHAPTER XIX.

OLD FOES MEET—INCH BY INCH!

SUDDENLY a dark pit had yawned in the path of Hard Cliff—so abrupt, so unexpected, that he had not seen it until he felt himself going over the brink! Too late to save himself! too late to even warn his friend, he went headlong down its precipitous side, an involuntary cry escaping his lips.

As the scout fell crashing down the aperture, the darkness quickly turned to light, and to his agreeable surprise he dropped upon some yielding substance, unharmed.

Somewhat bewildered by his descent and the new locality in which he had so unceremoniously found himself, he almost instantly sprang to his feet, to find that he had fallen upon a pile of skins, which had broken the force of his fall. Darting a quick glance around him, he saw that he was in a sort of cavern, dimly lit by the weird glare of a lot of flickering torches stuck here and there in the crevices of its rocky walls. A second look and he saw to his consternation that he was surrounded by a motley throng of rough, heavily-bearded men, fast springing to their feet in mingled terror and amazement, every man drawing a huge bowie, ready at the word to leap upon him! Good Heaven! he had fallen into the outlaws' den!

"A spy! a spy!" shrieked one of the startled band.

"Corral him!" commanded another; and before the unlucky adventurer could comprehend his situation, he was seized by overwhelming numbers, and borne down a resistless captive!

"Wal, I reckon ye'll be a leetle more keeful in ther futer how ye go spyin' round honest folkses' dwellin's, an' go peekin' in the'r winders!" snarled a tall, gaunt individual, who appeared to be leader of the crowd, after seeing that Cliff was securely bound, ending his speech in a loud guffaw, as if he had given expression to something witty. "That is to say, ef ye ever hev enny more futer!" he supplemented on second thought, and again he laughed.

"It—"
"Thar—thar! Don't spread yerself an' make enny high-soundin' speeches, 'cause I couldn't 'preciate 'em! 'Sides I'm jess goin' ter stow ye away till the cap'n kems. He's more gentile then I'm, an' ye ken say yer prayers to him, an' he'll giv ye yer papers fer the speerit land, es ther red-skins say! Haw-haw!"

Seizing a torch the facetious desperado led the way through a series of winding passages, followed by his companions with their captive, whom they at last thrust into one of the dark recesses; and in addition to the ligatures around his limbs, they secured another around his body and fastened the ends through a rift in the ledge.

Alone, Hard Cliff in vain tried to break or loosen his bonds, till, exhausted, he gave up his fruitless efforts, and attempted to reconcile himself to his fate.

Hour after hour dragged wearily by, and still bound, helpless, he lay there! The tortures of that long, fearful suspense were terrible. Not that he cared so much for his own welfare, but the strong man fairly writhed in agony as he thought of the defenseless maiden in the clutches of inhuman monsters, and realized how a single misstep had dashed their well-laid, well-nigh successful, plans to the wind. Oh, how he prayed that Gil Rey had escaped; and all the while the ominous fear would prey upon his mind that he must be dead!

At last it seemed as if the outlaws must have forgotten him, or left him to die! Already he had begun to feel the gnawing pangs of hunger, and his throat had long since become dry and parched. Surely, the sun must have completed another diurnal course, and—Hark! footsteps were coming! Joy! even the presence of his ruthless foes would be a relief.

A moment later, a man bearing a torch entered the place, when a gruff voice exclaimed:

"Wal, how ar' ye gettin' along hyar? The boys said they had got a spy, and I thought I would guv ye a friendly call."

"Monster, why this treatment?"

"Them es sows thorns must reap 'em!" replied the outlaw, tersely. "What bizness hed ye round hyar, ennyway? But yer voice sounds nateral; whar hev I seen ye?" and the desperado thrust the light close into his prisoner's face. Then, with a cry of amazement, he sprung back as pale as death.

"Good God! can that be you, Hardinge Cliff? I s'posed ye war dead, years ago!"

The outlaw leader, for the speaker was he whom we have known as Joe Corinth, was no less surprised than the scout, as the latter, too, had received a startling recognition.

"Yes, Paul Worth; it seems we both live, and meet again!"

"But now it is different!" broke in the other. "The tide has turned, and everything is in my favor!"

"Surely you will not, can not murder me, Paul! I nev'r injured you. As you hope for salvation in the time to come, spare me, and let there be one bright spot in your dark career!"

"Bah! you talk like a child, Hardinge Clifford! Say you never injured me, when you thwarted my dearest wish! robbed me of the fairest treasure heart ever craved!"

"We were friends once, Paul Worth! Con—"

"And but for your perfidiousness we should have been now!" interrupted the bandit.

"Hold, Paul! you condemn without cause! If you lost the prize you so dearly sought, it was through your own fault! Your own evil ways drove her from you! Anna Trevelian would never have married a drunkard and a gambler! You knew that, and still persisted in your recklessness and crime!"

"Enough, Sir Preacher! Your day of triumph has ended! and after long years mine has commenced. I have just removed an old enemy from my path, and got the child of Eda Claredon in my power. Now you step into my net, and my vengeance is at last complete!"

"Tell me, Paul Worth! have you her supposed to be the daughter of Colonel Raymun in your hands?"

"I don't mind telling you that I have. But you say the Colonel's supposed daughter; what do you mean?"

"Nothing which I care to repeat."

"Ye needn't repeat!" exclaimed Corinth, and falling into his old manner of speech, he continued:

"Can't be possible? Hev I bin so blin'? Wal, never min', it's all the same to me!"

"One question more, Paul: Do you know aught of my wife and son?"

"Yes; both dead!" replied the outlaw, unfeelingly.

"And you, you murdered them!"

"No, no, Hard Clifford! My hands are free from guilt there. They were slain by the Indians!"

"Thank God! you are at least innocent of that! But stay; I have another thing to ask: What became of Ray Hart?"

"I s'pose ye'd ax me questi'ns till ter-morrer mornin', ef I war fool enough to answer 'em! I'm in a pesky hurry, so jess shet up! I'll go an' git sum o' ther boys ter help tote ye to yer grave, fer I hev decided that ye shall be rubbed out! Howsumever, I'll giv' ye a bit of news to sort o' cheer ye up. We hev captured the old mountaineer, an' he'll ride in ther funeral with ye!"

The next instant he had gone to carry out his threat.

Gil Rey, a captive, and to die with him! Hope no more! In wild anguish the doomed man realized his helpless situation, and turned to Him above for strength to meet the impending ordeal. In that moment of dire affliction his mind fled vividly down the course of by-gone years. With startling distinctness, he saw the varying tides of life, and in every scene fell the shadow of that arch-demon, who was then plotting his death, to satisfy that most accursed of human passions—revenge!

"Wal, I must say we ar' in luck, ter-day!" cried the bandit, as at the end of a few minutes, he returned with a part of his followers. "San Mullre has jess kem in with his man, Dandy Rock Randell! We hev concluded to let ye all three kick in the same box! The more the merrier! Fetch him along, men."

Half-carried, half-dragged, Hard Cliff was forced along the rough passageways of the underground world, till it seemed as if there was no limit to the subterranean region. But at last, upon the brink of a black abyss, his captors paused. A way to one side could be heard the dashing of water.

Soon another party of outlaws neared the spot, and the scout saw that they bore Gil Rey and Rock Randell, prisoners like himself.

"See that they ar' securely bound, an' hev no weapons 'bout 'em!" commanded the leader; "then, put 'em down thar!" pointing with his torch to the place of more than Cimmerian darkness.

It was but the work of a few moments, with a rope ladder, to let the doomed men down into the fearful pit, which was about twenty feet in depth. Calmly they accepted their fate, knowing well it would be vain to sue for mercy.

As the ladder was withdrawn, the evil visage of the outlaw leader peered over the chasm's edge, glancing in fletish triumph by the side of his flaming brand, while he exclaimed:

"Thar! I hope ye ar' resigned to yer fate, fer thar is no way fer ye to escape! But jess above hyar is a place whar we ken let the water o' the river in upon ye; and to make the thing more sure, we will do it! While the water is fillin' around ye, ye'll hev chance ter say yer prayers, an' think o' my vengeance!"

"And mine, long-haired American!" shrieked the Mexican in the background.

Then the light disappeared, and the horde was gone.

"I guess we are done for now, sartin!" exclaimed Rock, who was the first to speak.

"You are right, old 'coon!" chimed in Gil Rey; "we hev tramped our last tramp, an' chipped our long trail!"

"There may be some egress of which the outlaws know not," said Hard Cliff; "let's search."

As best they could in the Stygian darkness, they worked their way around the confines of their prison-cell, but the cold, damp wall of stone met their touch upon every quarter! They were in a basin of solid rock.

"Hark!" suddenly warned Gil Rey; "there it comes!"

In a hushed stillness they heard plainly the rippling and running of water! Alas! how ominous those sounds!

Slowly but surely the sluggish current was approaching, and soon a stream was pouring down the stony wall; the outlaw had carried out his threat! The place would fill, and they must inevitably drown! But better perhaps so, than to die of starvation!

At first the doomed trio hardly realized their new peril. The water was coming in slowly, but the cavern seemed to hold every drop, and soon its bottom was covered, when the flood crept up, up its sides!

Higher and higher the flood marked its progress upon the rock! One foot, another, and yet another had been submerged, and still the fatal tide was rising!

The dreadful agony and soul-sickening horror of that awful hour cannot be told! Inch by inch they felt the current rise around them, up, up, higher and higher, still swelling, still ascending, until at last it swept over their shoulders!

In utter despair they closed their eyes, and the lips of Hardinge Cliff moved in an earnest appeal for mercy in the eternity fast coming. Of this life and world their last moments were swiftly passing!

CHAPTER XX.

"FORTUNE FAVORS US"—BUT, "NOW, WE'RE IN FOR IT!"

FEARFUL indeed was the situation of the drowning men. All were six feet in height, and stood erect as possible, but the water had reached to their shoulders! Soon, it would cover their heads, and—well, then, death would be a relief. But, listen! the

flowing of the stream had ceased! Joy! fully a minute passed and the flood did not increase—did not continue to rise. Perhaps the fountain-head had been closed, the current checked, and they would be saved! No! not saved, while in that black abyss, standing in five feet and a half of water, bound hands and feet.

The cold deluge was chilling them through and through, and soon they must perish, when suddenly they fancied they heard the sound of footsteps approaching. Anxiously they listened! They could not have been mistaken, and yet they do not hear them again! No! But look! A gleam of light quickly dispelled the gloom of the darkness! Unspeakable joy! With upturned faces, they waited, and hoped, and prayed that friends were coming to their rescue.

Some one paused upon the brink above, and over its glimmering tawny-bearded visage was mirrored in the glimmering glare of the torch, while in a low, guarded voice the person said:

"Sh! Are you living?"

In the same tone, Hard Cliff replied:

"Yes; but more dead than alive!"

"Thank God! I am not too late!" exclaimed the unknown, fervently.

"Who are you?" asked Cliff.

"A friend, come to save you. Please keep quiet while I find some means of getting you out."

Like the rays of light upon the cavern's darkness, the words fell upon the ears of the eager listeners. Then, after a few hurried moves, the man dropped something down the bank, and the next instant he was rapidly descending, bearing the torch.

"Fortune favors us," said the stranger. "The robbers did not take the trouble to carry off the ladder, and I will soon have you safely out of this. As I came here, I took the precaution to shut off the water, so it cannot get any higher. But first, I suppose I must free your limbs, for I know that you are bound."

Climbing to the ladder, and holding the brand with one hand, he quickly drew a knife and severed the thongs binding their arms.

"There, one of you hold the light, while I help the others out of this."

The last though no easy task was soon accomplished, and the three men, albeit chilled to the bone and nearly exhausted were saved from the fearful hole.

"You have our unbounded gratitude," said Hard Cliff, grasping their deliverer's hand. "To whom is it we owe our lives? Your countenance is unfamiliar to me."

"No praise, if you please, gentlemen! I did not rescue you for thanks, but because it was my duty. As to who I am it matters not; suffice it for me to say that I belonged to the robber gang when you were consigned to your doom. But, tired of the accursed life, I had resolved to abandon it, and the inhuman treatment you received confirmed that decision. Before I fled, however, I determined to save you if possible. Still I feared it would be too late ere I could act!"

"You will go with us?" they asked.

"I shall not desert you until I have seen you safe beyond this infernal region. But, before we go I must ask you to help me rescue another prisoner whom the fiends have in their power—a woman!"

"God forgive us! We forgot her in our selfish joy! But, can you guide us to her?" asked Cliff, anxiously.

"Yes; but we have got to work with extreme caution, as the outlaws have sentinels posted all through here. Follow close to me, and don't say a word."

After wringing the water as best they could from their saturated garments, the little party began to slowly traverse the dismal corridors. Even the guide seemed almost unacquainted with the way, and it was with great difficulty they advanced through the nearly impenetrable gloom.

"Here is a chance to get some arms, if you wish," the ex-outlaw said, at last pausing before the entrance to one of the numerous cavities honeycombing the subterranean world. "We are likely to run upon some of the cut-throats, and rather than be recaptured, you would fight."

Warlike implements of almost every description were found piled promiscuously together. Without hesitation, our friends selected whatever promised the best defense.

"I feel more like eating than fighting!" exclaimed Hard Cliff. "By the way, guide, do you know how long it has been since I was captured?"

"You were taken last night—twelve hours ago! I don't wonder you are hungry. But, follow me, and I will show you food in plenty."

As good as his word the man led the way to what appeared to be the provision-room of the outlaw confederation.

After feasting on the dried beef and stale bread, which in their half-starved state tasted as sweet as the rarest of dainties, they were again following the dark passages.

"Hist!" suddenly warned the guide; "we shall find a guard at every corner now! She is confined in that direction," pointing to the right.

With redoubled caution, they advanced a few rods further in the direction indicated, when again the leader stopped abruptly.

"Hark!" he hissed. "Hear those footsteps? There is a sentry just round the bend, and we have got to silence him before we can proceed without molestation!"

A hushed quiet followed the speaker's communication, and suddenly upon the oppressive stillness the sounds of distant shouts and cries were borne to their ears.

"Ah!" muttered the ex-bandit, *sotto voce*, "I was

hoping the villains had sought repose ere this. But they are wide awake in one of their midnight carousals! We have got a fearful gantlet to run, and it will require all the nerve and energy we can command. But first, stand perfectly still where you are, while I go ahead, and see what I can do for the watch-dog yonder."

Holding the torch over his head, the guide boldly and in apparent carelessness, hastily advanced till he reached the angle, when, before the sentinel had time to challenge, he suddenly exclaimed in a low tone:

"Ho, Tom! that you?"

"Wal, I don't reckon!" exclaimed a gruff voice. "But who ar' ye?"

"Beg pardon! but where's Tom—"

The speaker had still continued to approach the unsuspecting sentry, and as the name left his tongue, his right arm shot out like a flash, when a quick, sharp blow struck the desperado between the eyes. A slight noise followed as the intrepid guide caught the body of his senseless foe, and lowered it to the bottom.

"Come on! quick!" he then cried to his followers; "there is something wrong among the bandits! I think they are searching for me, as I can hear them in every direction! We must get out of this, or we are lost!"

Then he darted swiftly forward, holding the brand low, partly to somewhat conceal its light and partly to show more distinctly the uneven surface of the stony passway.

Sure enough, shouts and curses could be plainly heard, and coming, too, from every quarter!

"There comes the gang of fiends!" cried the ex-member. "We must destroy our light, or it will be all up with us!" when he dashed the torch to the earth, and they were instantly in total darkness.

"This way—to the left! Keep close to me."

In the blinding blackness they rushed on, but only for an instant. Suddenly a massive wall barred their course! In vain they tried to find further egress! The solid rock rose on every hand! They turned back, when to their dismay they saw a horde of armed men coming in the main passage from either way!

"We are in for it now!" said the strange unknown, coolly.

CHAPTER XXI.

"NOW FOR FUN!"—VICTORIOUS BUT NOT TRIUMPHANT! NEARER and nearer drew their bloodthirsty foes! Would they pass without discovering them? It seemed impossible, and crouching in the darkness, with lips compressed and hands nervously clutching their weapons, they nerved themselves for the worst.

Seemingly unconscious of the close proximity of their prey, the fierce pursuers rushed on, approaching the hiding fugitives from either direction, the two parties seeming fated to meet on that very spot! Still, calm, self-possessed, they could but wait for the fatal moment.

The suspense was of short duration. Almost immediately the outlaws from the right reached the place, and their flaming torches lit up the scene with distinctness; the dazzling light, penetrating every nook and corner, disclosed plainly the hunted four! And directly in front the desperadoes were brought to a stand by the other gang, whose leader, frantically waving a brand of fire, was exclaiming in a hoarse, excited voice:

"Turn back there, every man of you! Quick, as you value your lives! We have been betrayed, and a hundred armed men are upon our heels! Quick, for the secret pass, or we are lost! The captain has fled!"

It was a startling speech, and for a moment the robbers were terror-stricken—held spellbound. No one in all the motley band had yet seen the nervous figures so close by them. But, as with mad cries and angry curses, they turned to obey their leader's mandate, the foes stood face to face!

"Hyar they ar', boys! Come on! let's wipe the coyotes out, and then we'll levant in good shape! Whoop!" and in wild frenzy the desperadoes surrounded and hurled themselves upon their enemies whom they had so suddenly found sternly at bay.

With the scouts and their intrepid companion, of course it would be a death-struggle! Thus, as only men with their all at stake can fight, they met the furious onset.

Though backed by overwhelming numbers in the rear, owing to the small area of the place, but a few could really face at a time the determined men in their retreat; and against such desperate valor the contest might have been prolonged for quite a spell. But, just as the first charge had been met, and shoulder to shoulder our brave friends had drawn their long bowies for close, hand-to-hand work, loud huzzas rent the air, and the hurried tramp of a body of men was heard rapidly approaching.

Without stopping to gain the victory which would inevitably have been theirs, the outlaws turned and fled in terror. None too soon either, to save a worse fate, for in an instant a score of gallant men—the Rangers and Regulators of Chesterville—under the lead of True Bill, reached the spot.

"Whoop—hooray!" cried the impetuous Dandy Rock, leaping forward into the path, "it am the boys from Chesterville, an' thar'll be fun now!"

"Wal, by hooky! of hyar ain't Rock Randell, alive an' kickin' I'm a gone beaver!" exclaimed Bill, grasping his comrade's hand. "By gracious, cap'n, we thought ye war gone under, sure! An' good Lord! take this 'coon for a wipin'-stick ef thar hain't Gil Rey, jess the old boss I ain't s'ced' for a twelveth month!"

"But how kem ye hyar so sudd'nt, Bill? an' fer

marcy's sake how did ye find the trail so slick? We war a-jess thinkin' our top-knots war a-goner, when in ye kem ker-slap an' sp'iled all the fun!"

"It war all through thet gal, Wild Kate. I tell ye she's a regular trump! She kem to the Prairie Home to-day jess es I got back from Sou'-west Bend, fer I hurried hum es I heerd of what war goin' on hyar, an' she sed ye and the others war captured. So we rigged up this afternoon, an' she steered us es straight es a book! But, who's thet?" the mountaineer suddenly asked, as he saw for the first time the ex-outlaw.

"He's a true beaver, he is!" answered Rock. "Jess the 'coon what saved all our skulps! I tell ye, Bill, we hev seen sum purty tall doins'. But I musn't yarn it now! Let's wipe the varmints out afore we lose 'em!"

The Regulator chief was right. If they wished to perform their duty, it was time they were moving. So, without another instant's hesitation, the Rangers, now re-enforced by our willing adventurers, took the track of their hated enemies.

In the main cavern the foes met—the Regulators with a bold, determined front, the outlaws in a dogged desperation. Their shouts of triumph mingling with the shrieks of the cowering wretches, the relentless assailants walked into an easy victory. Here and there the discomfited banditti attempted to rally, but like a troop of raw recruits without a governing leader they only made a wavering resistance; and after a short struggle our friends found themselves masters of the field, without the loss of a single man, or hardly shedding blood.

It was the work of but a few moments to securely bind the captured outlaws, for it had been decided to take them to the settlement for trial and punishment, when a discovery was made which quickly told the secret of their easy victory and nearly effaced the triumph of their conquest. Joe Corinth and Sam Murre, the joint leaders of the band, were nowhere to be found! In some mysterious way they had received warning of their danger, and, like the cowards they were, had fled. Twelve of their gang had surrendered, and doubtless more had escaped, but no regret was expressed at this, in their loss of bigger game.

As soon as the fight would permit, and while the Regulators were securing their victims, to find that their real prize was lost, Hard Cliff and Rock Randel, led by the ex-robber, had hurriedly sought the cavern where the latter had said Miss Raymun was confined. Then, judge of their surprise and disappointment when, instead of finding their fair friend, and releasing her from a fearful captivity, no trace of her could be found!

When the two discoveries were linked together, it seemed plain that the bandit chiefs in their hasty flight had not abandoned their devilish schemes, but had taken their prisoner with them. Hardinge Cliff's hopes again crushed at the very moment of his expected realization of a joyful reunion, he was nearly frantic with grief. The suspense was fearful, and the strong man was fast yielding to despair, for his was not the sorrow of a day but that of a lifetime. The ex-outlaw, too, now appeared strangely affected.

Perhaps the desperate wretches had not fled, after all, but were hiding in some of the recesses of the cave, waiting for them to leave, when they would come out and depart at their leisure. The thought added new impulse, and a wild search followed; still in vain!

At last the hunt was given over, and willingly the Regulators turned to leave the dismal region. Hurrying along the only passage of egress, the strange guide was in advance, and when nearing the open air he saw a man skulking out into the valley. Thinking it was either Corinth or Murre he hurried on in cautious, but rapid pursuit.

CHAPTER XXII.

STARTLING DISCOVERIES—THE EX-OUTLAW UNMASKED—THE MYSTERY OF THE DEAD RIDER SOLVED!

WARYLY the ex-outlaw followed the fugitive. Once in the daylight and he saw the other was not either of the men he had supposed; still feeling it meant no good he kept on.

The fleeing man pressing so eagerly forward suddenly stopped. In his hurried flight he had run upon Wild Kate, who had staid in the valley while the Regulators were doing their work. A moment he glared upon the brave girl; then in sudden rage he snatched a knife from his belt, and rushed toward her, exclaiming revengefully:

"Curse ye, Wild Kate! 'Tis to ye we owe all this! Take thet fer yer trouble! an' thet!"

Though taken by surprise, the heroic maiden drew her revolver and fired, but in her haste the bullet missed its mark, and she was at the mercy of the desperado's vengeance!

The unknown alone saw her peril, and with a shout, he sprang forward, reaching the spot at a single bound. Then the outlaw was hurled from his victim, when, turning upon his new foe, the two closed in deadly combat.

The shots and cries brought the rangers to the place almost immediately; but ere they could reach the scene, however, the two were locked so close in their fierce embrace that it was impossible at the moment to aid their friend. In fact, the contest was short. The enemies were too evenly pitted, and their purpose too fatal to continue in suspense long. As they fell to the earth, writhing to and fro on the gravelled surface, two flashes of steel gleamed in the air, and when they shot down the combatants separated—the contest was ended!

The excited group was instantly standing by the prostrate men. Though evidently having a fatal wound, the robber was still living. But the other was silent, unconscious, lifeless!

"Good Lord! he mustn't be dead!" cried Rock in a frenzy, as he knelt by the motionless form. "He has done too much for us to be rubbed out like this now! He—"

Further speech upon the part of the Regulator chief was abruptly checked by a sudden transformation in the looks of the fallen person. The long, tawny, yellow whiskers and mustache which had so nearly covered his face seemed starting from the skin, and the ranger's hand catching in the tangled mass, it was torn from his position—a false beard!

"My God, boys, look!" fairly shouted Randel, as a smooth, marble-like visage met their gaze; "'tis the Taos Tiger!"

Sure enough, the ex-outlaw was Hart Range!

For a moment the crowd stood in amazement, speechless. Then, with a glad cry, Wild Kate pointed to the senseless figure, exclaiming:

"See! he is not dead! He breathes! He lives!"

It was so. He surely breathed, and in a minute he began to show signs of returning consciousness. Water was quickly procured, and friendly hands were soon bathing his temples and caring for his wound, which was not thought to be very serious. No one then hinted the enmity they held against the sufferer, or the dark crime hanging over his name.

While Hart Range was being cared for, there was another scene of equal interest close by. The dying bandit, for his life-blood was ebbing fast away, suddenly rallied from the stupor overpowering him, and asked, plainly:

"Is he dead?" meaning his antagonist.

Receiving a negative answer, he continued, fervently:

"Thank God! But where is Kate?"

"Here," replied a low voice, and the strange wail approached his side. "Oh, Harry! why did you do this?" she cried.

"Forgive me, sister, for I was mad with whisky and revenge! You have told me it would come to this, and I laughed at you in scorn! But I see my mistake now, when it is too late! You will be alone in the world now, Kate! But you will be better off, for father and I were a curse to you! I can see it now!"

"Ask him if he can tell anything of Miss Raymun," said Hard Cliff.

"Yes, yes; I can," he replied, catching the word; "and I am glad to know I can do one good act before I die. Joe Corinth and the Mexican were warned of your meditated attack by me, for I was one of their scouts, and learned of it from Doc Killburn at the Prairie Home less than an hour after Kate saw True Bill! The Doc was one of our spies, and always kept us well posted around Chester-ville!"

Here the wounded man paused for breath, but soon resumed:

"Well, too cowardly to face you in a fight, our leaders took Miss Raymun and fled out of the secret pass, as we called it, unknown to the boys. This passage leads out of the south end of the cave, upon the cliff overhanging the river. In what appears the solid rock is a section easily removed from the inside, and fitted in so closely that it would be hard to detect it from the outside. They have gone to the Taos valley with the girl. But they will stop tomorrow night at an old *fincade*, on Walker's creek, a league north of South-west Bend. You will strike their trail the best from the Black Gulch region, and by following sharp, you can overtake them where I said."

Again the speaker broke down, exhausted.

After awhile the expiring man rallied once more, and said:

"Among the animals you will find in the corral by the river is the white horse I rode when acting as a decoy, for I was the white rider! Kate, I give him to you, to remember one good act of me. See that my body has proper burial. Forgive me, sis—"

The thread of life had broken, and Harry Rane, the outlaw, was no more!

Hart Range soon recovered his senses, and it was thought he would be able to ride on horseback to Chester-ville. Accordingly preparations were made at once for a speedy departure.

While a part were burying the body of Harry Rane, Wild Kate's brother, the only person who had been killed in all the struggle and rout of the outlaws, some were getting the horses from the bandits' corral, and still others were bringing out whatever valuables they could find which the robbers had collected in their rendezvous.

At last the cavalcade was ready to move, and with True Bill and Rock Randel at the head the procession started on its long and tedious journey.

The outlaws, who had been mounted upon some of their own animals, had to be closely watched against escape, and though it was bright starlight, there was no moon; thus, across a broken, trackless waste, but slow progress was made. But without any mishap the Black Gulch was reached about sunrise. Here, it had been decided that a party should take the trail of the fugitive desperadoes, to follow them, and rescue Alice Raymun. Thus a halt was ordered just by the edge of Chester Plain.

The cavalcade had barely drawn rein when a horse was heard to gallop out of the growth upon prairie.

It was the dead rider!

Determined to solve the mystery if possible, Hard Cliff and Gil Rey with others, quickly rode down by the timber to intercept the strange centaur. But, frightened by their sudden appearance, the sorrel turned and dashed back for the forest above.

Wild Kate had ridden out upon the edge of the clearing to watch the capture, and seeing the mysterious horseman was likely to escape the scouts, she urged her mustang almost into the other's path,

and quickly undoing the line dexterously lassoed the wild steed as he was passing.

The violence of the sudden stoppage threw the singular rider from his seat, and he fell to the earth in a huddled heap.

A curious crowd instantly gathered around the form, and when it was straightened out, with its white features upturned, every face blanched with horror!

Before them lay the body of Walter Raymun, stark and lifeless!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE AVENGERS' DOOM—LOST AGAIN!

"WALTER RAYMUN! and dead!" some one gasped. Alas! it was too true! and, spellbound, the lookers-on could only stare and wonder, and wonder and stare!

"What does it mean?" a voice at last found courage to ask.

Silence alone answered.

Save, perhaps, the outlaws, there was but one person in all the assembly who was not sorely affected by the startling discovery, and to him it had no shock! Why? Because he was expecting it! Who? Hart Range!

Why don't he speak?

Wait, please!

As soon as the consternation had somewhat abated, various conjectures were offered by different members of the throng as the probable interpretation of young Raymun's fate. But suddenly they were interrupted by Hart, who said in a low but distinct tone:

"Gentlemen, I think I can give you the key to the mystery."

"Hear! hear!" cried a chorus of voices, and eager listeners waited for him to continue.

"Without doubt in my mind Walter was killed by Corinth or some of his followers the night Miss Raymun was abducted. I found his body on the plain, and putting it on the back of my horse was about to return with it to his father's house. But, just as I had got it secured in the saddle I was surrounded and captured by the outlaws. The horse escaped with his burden. Oh! I have much more I wish to say, but I have not the strength to do it now!" and overcome by the exertion and excitement in addition to the severe fatigue of his ride, he sunk back in his high Mexican saddle too much exhausted to continue his explanations.

Though the reasons given by Hart Range were plausible enough, it would have been better, perhaps, for him had he remained silent, or said more. He had made no allusion to the crime of which he was known to be guilty; and while he was speaking this was in every mind present, and paramount to it was the thought that if he had done the one deed he had both! He was of the robbers, then, and even now was little better—only a deserter from their ranks!

Giving the lie to the story and "public opinion" as well, the outlaws, most of whom were on the raid at the time, all stoutly protested that no person was killed by any of their number that night.

Still that was no place nor time for further delay upon the subject.

Of course it was necessary to bear the body of the unfortunate collegian to his home; and how could it be better and more easily done than by placing it upon the back of the sorrel in the same manner in which they had found it? A party of four was delegated to carry the plan into effect. Owing to the peculiar atmosphere of the Texan climate, the remains had not begun to show the signs of that decomposition which three days in a more northern clime would have unmistakably marked them, and rendered a removal impossible.

Hard Cliff, Rock Randel and Gil Rey, with three others—all that could be well spared—volunteered the hazardous undertaking of hunting down the outlaw leaders, and saving their victim.

Just as the divisions were about to separate, Rock called True Bill aside, and in answer to that worthy's wonderment, he addressed him in an impressive manner as follows:

"Bill, old hoss, for nigh onto twenty years we hev hitched teams. It has been a heap long trail, it has! an' menny's the hard show we hev had! But, whether on the war-path or in camp, has this beaver ever played 'possum'?"

"Nary a chip!" exclaimed the other, grasping his hand, and wondering what his strange companion was after; "ye hev been a true 'coon, ye hev; an' menny's the time ye hev saved my h'ar."

"Wagh!" continued Rock, "ye hev never turned on me, an' I know ye won't now; so watch the stick! I am goin' on a blind trail! But I am bound to foller it, fer hain't thet sneakin' Greaser to the end o' it? An' though this am a big ball o' dirt, his path an' mine cross too often. But, as I said, it am a blind trail, an' I may git throwed! Tharfor I hev a favor to ax o' ye. The boys are bound to wring a cold deal on the Taos Tiger! I see it! He may be frisky with the bowle, and belong to a gang o' desperadoes, but he ain't a coyote! He is a true hoss to any team! He has kept this 'coon's top-knot twice; an' I want ye to swear that he shan't be harmed till I git back! Fer if I go under, see that he has his papers right, and don't git fogged! Will ye swear it, Bill?"

"Yes, old 'coon; quicker'n a wink o' a mule's ear! I sw'ar I'll stand by the lad till he is safe, or I fall in the scrimmage!"

"God bless you, Bill! I wish every man in Texas had as true a friend as you are."

Thus the noble-hearted twain parted; and a few minutes later, with their respective parties, were pursuing their different courses.

We will follow the fortunes of the trailers, noting

what occurred of interest. As Harry Rane had said, the trail of the outlaws, which had been made but a few hours before, was discovered to the west of the Black Gulch. After following it a while with retarded progress, and finding it led in the direction indicated by the dying bandit, they abandoned it, when under the guidance of Rock, who affirmed that he could go directly to the expected rendezvous, they were enabled to advance at better speed.

The sun poured down hot and sultry, so that our horsemen were obliged to allow their steeds to rest long before midday, and after, too. But they did not care to reach their destination before nightfall, and there was no need of hurrying; thus the time hung lightly on the hands of all but one, and he was racked by the feverish heat of a fearful anxiety.

About sunset the cavalcade drew rein by Walker's creek. Just below them was the old *j. cale* where they expected to find their foes.

Leaving the others behind with the horses, Cliff and the Regulator chief resolved on an immediate reconnaissance of the place.

The lone structure so isolated from all habitations stood near the stream, thus by keeping in the thick bushes which skirted the latter's bank, our scouts found but little trouble in getting within plain view of the anxiously looked-for hut. But around the deserted spot there was not a sign of life!

Fearing, after all, that they were on the wrong track, or else that their enemies had come and gone, they continued to slowly advance, and still not a sound or move broke the stillness and solitude of the ominous scene.

What did it mean? Were they to be baffled and disappointed again? or had the desperadoes learned of their pursuit, and were lying in wait to spring a trap upon them? Be it as it would, they yet crept cautiously nearer, unable to bear the suspense of uncer ainty.

At last the friends were close enough to see that the ground in front of the building was completely trodden up by the hoof-prints of horses. Ay, the worst was realized! The abductors had been there and left, for there were no animals visible now.

Throwing aside all further caution, they boldly approached and entered the vacated hut. Vacated? No! As they crossed the threshold they saw two men lying upon the rude flooring! two men lying so still and quiet that, though surprised and startled, they did not draw back, but kept on!

Amazed, the scouts paused in the center of the room, gazing in speechless wonder upon the spectacle so abruptly blazoned on their vision.

Side by side, where they had fallen in fierce encounter, with knives still clutched in their rigid grasp, lay the bodies of two persons, weltering in their life-blood! They were Joe Corinth and Sam Mullre, both dead!

In silence, the living couple gazed upon the lifeless twain. Bygone years told of deep wrongs and fearful sufferings the stricken ones had done the others. But death effaces enmity, and no feeling but regret and pity rankled in the breast of the survivors. Near by was an empty bottle; upon a rickety table was strewn a pack of cards; together they unfolded a secret. Rum-gambling—drunken anger—a quarrel—bowies readily drawn—and crime at its own hands had secured its inevitable retribution.

"Well," said Hardinge Cliff at last, with a breath of relief, "His will not mine be done. Without the interference of our hands they have gone before that Most High tribunal. Who would gainsay it? We have only her to find, and then go on our way in peace. She is probably in this other apartment. Come, let's free her as quickly as possible, for her captivity must be fearful! Oh! can it be possible that I am going to behold my long-lost darling? Father in Heaven, give me strength to meet the ordeal, if it should be all a dream!"

"Excuse me, cap'n," suddenly exclaimed Rock, like one awakened from a trance, "fer I came nigh fergittin' her! But can it be possible that he am rubbed out? an' will hunt me no more! Wal, who'd a-thought the trail would hev ended so! Still, es ye say, it am all fer the best, though life am a blind trail!"

Then they turned to search for the captive maiden; but, look where they would no trace of her could be found! *Alice Raymun was gone!*

In wild anguish, the grief-stricken father rushed hither and thither; yet, vainly! Alice was certainly lost, and now there was no clew to tell of her fate! Good Heaven! the fiendish persecutors may have murdered her ere they destroyed themselves! The thought drove the wretched man nearly mad! Where should they go? What could they do now? Oh, the fearful despondency of that hour!

CHAPTER XXIV.

STARTLING DEVELOPMENTS—SUNSHINE SUCCEEDS SHADOW.

Two days have elapsed since the incidents recorded last.

Three horsemen were drawing rein in front of Colonel Raymun's residence. They were Hard Cliff, Rock Randel and Gil Rey.

Since we last saw our friends but one thing had occurred to them worthy of note, and it was that which had brought them here.

After a day's fruitless search for some trace of the missing maiden, a messenger from Chesterville found them, bearing the joyful tidings that Alice Raymun had come back in safety to her home. Austen Warne, anxious as any in regard to her fate, had left the colonel to his attendants, the same night the Regulators went to the Red Lands, and reaching the Black Gulch, he was just in season to see the outlaws fleeing with Alice. Recklessly, the gold collegian followed. In the wild chase which

ensued he at first lost his course, but finally ran upon the old cabin where he found the abductors, dead, when he quickly freed Miss Raymun. After a few hours' rest, they started to return, and going by the South-west Bend of course missed our party. But in all, the Hand of Divinity had shaped the end, and it was well.

Those two days were closely interwoven with joy and sorrow at the home we are about to enter.

Colonel Raymun had passed the crisis of his danger, and, in spite of the excitement surrounding him was on the way to a rapid recovery.

In sorrow, the fond father and mother beheld the lifeless form of their only and beloved son. But theirs was a true Christian spirit, and they bowed their heads in grief without complaining.

His body was borne to its grave by sympathizing friends, with many a regret and tear.

The joy of Alice's return, safe and unharmed, was a halo of light in that dark hour, for though she was not their own, she was cherished with true parental love. Of her sufferings, anxiety and grief in that tedious and dreadful captivity, we beg to be spared the pain of relating. Ever trusting Him who ruleth all things as He thinketh best, she had a strong helper, and bore up with remarkable fortitude. The sudden and terrible fate of Walter had cast a gloom over her usual buoyancy, but, perhaps, not as might have been expected. Deep down in her heart was locked a secret, which she dare not acknowledge even to herself.

Hart Range had been escorted by True Bill to the home of Rock Randel, the best place in all Shelby where he could have found shelter, for there he had been tenderly cared for, and had true friends. There was no danger from his wound, and in a few days he would be well. But from another source he had been in extreme peril, and only through the heroic bravery of True Bill had he lived to see this day. Loud and bitter had been the denunciations against him, and once Bill had been forced to draw his rifle to keep the mob at bay. Ay, Rock Randel had been a true prophet, and his friend a noble protector.

When the Regulators got back from the Red Lands, Doc Killburn had fled, and he was never seen again in Shelby county. Thus he escaped their just wrath, but a career like his is surely destined to meet its punishment sooner or later, and rumor afterward told that he finally perished in a drunken brawl in Taos.

The outlaw prisoners had been summarily dealt with according to the strict mandates of border law and justice.

Thus we find affairs the morning last designated.

With joyful anticipations, though tinged with a feeling of nervous dread, Hardinge Cliff, with his companions, was ushered into Colonel Raymun's room. As the usual formality of an introduction was passed, and he stepped forward to grasp the wounded man's hand, a low cry escaped his lips.

"Ray Hart!" he cried, "can this be possible?"

While the other, in equal surprise exclaimed:

"Hardinge Clifford! or am I dreaming?"

Then the friends of former years were locked in each other's arms.

"This is indeed a glad surprise," said he whom we have known as Hard Cliff; "I came here hoping to find a daughter, but little thought of meeting you!"

"To find a daughter!" repeated the colonel. "What! Alice your child? Why have I never seen it before?"

"Nay, nay, colonel, don't excite yourself! Though I hope to find in Alice my long-lost babe, I may be disappointed!"

"Tell Alice her father has come to see her!" cried the strangely affected, impetuous colonel, and then, overcome by his exertions he sunk back upon his pillow.

Wondering and amazed, Alice soon entered the apartment.

A single glance and the father recognized in the heroine his life-separated daughter.

Pen is inadequate to portray the joy and gladness of that reunion. Questions were asked and explanations given till it hardly needed the chain and locket to prove the relationship. The happiness of that hour was unbounded. Still, there was a greater surprise in store!

While the father and daughter were yet in the ecstasy of their joy, and the guardian was jubilant with congratulations, Hart Range, pale and weak from suffering, entered the room. But, seeing who was present, he seemed about to withdraw, when the colonel exclaimed, cheerily:

"Hold on, Hart! you are just the person I was wishing to see! Come, my boy, you accused me of killing your father, when here he is alive and well!"

"Excuse me, colonel!" cried the Tiger, not comprehending the other's meaning. "I could not rest without seeing you! But, had I known you had company, I—"

"Tut, tut, my boy! I have a great surprise for you! Please step this way; and you, too, Hardinge. There! Walter Hardinge Clifford, allow me to make you acquainted with your son, Arthur Hart Clifford! Hart, this is your father whom you and I have thought dead!"

Unspeakable amazement! Inarticulate joy! Unable to realize at that moment the glad tidings, the two men stood in speechless wonder.

"Ha—ha—ha!" laughed the colonel, gleefully, "you don't seem to think it possible! But it is all plain to me!"

To the astonished lookers-on, the relationship, too, was evident, for the score and few odd years' difference of ages served only to mark the likeness in their features and general appearance. Quickly, they not only saw but felt the tie between them, and a mutual recognition followed.

"Come, Alice," cried the senior, when the first

transport of his new joy had passed, "you have not only found a father, but a brother!"

"Can it be possible you are my sister, Alice?" exclaimed Hart, as he pressed her to his breast.

"Oh, brother, brother, my heart long ago seemed to tell me of this, for since our first meeting I have felt for you a sister's love!"

Verily that was a happy scene. When at last the first sensation of the joyous surprise had somewhat abated, the Tiger turning to the wounded colonel, said:

"One thing more, Colonel Raymun, and I shall indeed be happy. I have come here to-day to humbly sue your forgiveness for the wrongs I have done you. I could not content myself until I had done it!"

"I hardly understand you, Hart. Surely you have not wronged me, for your conduct was perfectly natural under the mistake we both were laboring in."

"No, no, colonel! I abused you and acted like a madman! But I wish to offer some explanations in regard to my past course of action; and if you think proper to grant it, I shall indeed be glad to have your pardon."

"My younger days," Hart began, "were spent with an old ranchman in the Taos valley. At first I supposed he was my father, but soon learned my error; and when he died he called me to his side, when I was told the secret of my life."

"My father's name had been Walter Clifford, and he had been foully murdered by one Arthur Hart. This had occurred nineteen years before in the parish of Perth, Louisiana. As proof of the deed my foster-parent, who at the time was a justice in the place, left the court record of the trial and sentence of the murderer. By some secret aid the guilty man escaped, and under the name of Arthur Raymun was living in Shelby county."

"The untimely fate of my parent so preyed upon my mind that I finally resolved to find his assassin, and see that he had the punishment he had so long escaped. For that purpose I came to Chesterville."

"You all know the unfortunate circumstances of my arrival, and that same fatality has seemed to follow me ever since; but after a while I learned that a secret foe was hunting me down, and I no longer wondered at the cause."

"Killburn of the Prairie Home, as I was afterwards told by Kate Rane, had been hired by Corinth, the bandit chief, to see that I was hung at my trial; and he it was who excited the mob to the deed. But thwarted there by that noble, heroic girl, who has done so much for me, he devised another method of ending my career."

"The afternoon of the night I had fixed in my mind to call upon you for explanations of that affair uppermost in my thoughts, a slow poison was given me at the tavern. Of course I did not realize it then, but, crazed, maddened by the intoxicating influence of the fiery drug, I sought you!"

"Thank God! I can truthfully say that not for a moment had I intended to avenge the death of my father by taking your life; but had decided to punish you through the justice of our laws. Thus, when my ride through the night air, after I left you in that fearful rage, partially restored me to my right senses, I turned my horse, and came back to make amends for my conduct, and plead for your forgiveness."

"When I reached here, my arrival drove off the outlaws from their accursed work. The leader had barely finished his murderous attack upon you; and, supposing you were dead, I was in the act of drawing the knife from your wound, when I was discovered and mistaken for your murderer! In real terror I fled! As I mounted my horse a bullet struck me in the side, and, still suffering from the poison, I rode away more dead than alive!"

"Upon the plain I found the body of Walter, who was probably killed by the robbers; and placing the remains upon my horse, for alone I could not carry them in any other way, and I dared not leave them on the prairie to go for help, I resolved to run the risk and return with them."

"Then a party of bandits surprised and captured me, but my horse escaped with his burden. I was given the choice of joining their ranks, or to meet death. Knowing Alice was a prisoner in their hands, and thinking perhaps I could be of service in her rescue, I accepted the former without hesitation."

"You know the rest. Through a kind Providence our foes have been overthrown, while we are spared. I am thankful to know that, though under a cloud, I have ever acted conscientiously and in an humble way tried to do my duty. There, you all know my secret and the mystery surrounding my course. Now, Colonel Raymun, will you forgive me?"

"Without sin there can be no repentance. I see nothing for me to forgive. We have all had our indefatigable foe in some person. When boys your father and I, with another, Paul Worth, were ardent friends. Together we three grew to manhood. But Paul frequently associating with vile company became wild and reckless. Then, as fate ordained it, he and I loved and sought for the hand of the same woman. Allowing Dissipation to become his master, he lost what I gained. In jealous rage he swore to be revenged. Again he sought for marriage; this time your father's choice. Of course, he was unsuccessful. Then he commenced his double vengeance. My wife and I lost our darling girl-baby, and to this day we have never been able to get a single clew of her! Your father was supposed to have been drowned while out in a row-boat, I was with him, escaped, and was arrested and convicted of his murder. I couldn't deny to myself that I had accidentally been instrumental in his death! But, God knows I was innocent of any crime. My brave

wife aided me to escape, and we came here, where, dropping my last name, I have lived in security. On our way here we found Alice, but a wee bit of a babe, and she seeming to partly take the place of our lost Eda, we have tenderly cared for her. But at last the fiendish avenger—"

"Hush, hush, colonel! he is dead! Let the past be forgotten, and we will begin a new life. I sympathize with you in your great loss of a son and daughter. And I, too, have suffered! My darling Anna, the wife of my bosom, sleeps in her lonely wildwood grave, the victim of those savages who carried off Arthur and Alice. But I find much to live for yet and in God's great mercy I will not murmur."

CHAPTER XXV.

BACK FROM THE GRAVE—UNMASKED!

A MONTH has passed, when again we raise the curtain on another scene in our border-life drama.

Colonel Raymun had so far recovered that he was able to move about. But the loss of his only son had filled his heart with sorrow and his old-time vivacity was now seldom seen. Still he did not complain.

Hart Range Clifford had fully recovered. He was no longer a hunted fugitive, but a respected citizen loved by all. From their frequent intercourse, we judge that a strong intimacy has sprung up between him and Wild Kate. More than that! It has ripened into a true, lasting love. But after all, it is nothing surprising. We more than half guessed it from the first! Sincerely, we wish them a happy union, and know they deserve it.

Austen Warne was still at the colonel's, a welcome visitor, for since his rescue of Alice he had fared well for friendship. Still he had seemed restless and uneasy. Something was preying upon his mind. Something, too, which was wearing his very life away! Young, educated, accomplished, vigorous in body and mind, with a future apparently so bright, what was it that hung so lowly over his being? We must know ere the curtain falls!

At the time we speak of, he and Alice were alone in the colonel's library. This was an interview he had long sought for! Perhaps, here laid the secret!

"Yes, Alice, I have waited impatiently for this opportunity, and I know you will forgive me for my haste when you learn that my love has driven me to it! Say, dearest, will you be mine? Can I hope? Say 'yes,' and I shall indeed be happy!"

As he spoke he clasped her hand in his, and gazed entrancingly into her face. She, pale and nervous, was about to reply, when his eye wandered from her to the door, and then, with a startling cry, he suddenly released his grasp, and stood like one paralyzed!

Merciful Heaven! standing in the doorway, pale, ghostly, motionless, was—could it be?—no—yes—it was *Walter Raymun, or his apparition!*

"Good God!" cried Warne, "look! see! He has come back from his grave!"

Then, with an exclamation of terror, he fell to the floor, senseless!

With a shriek, Alice would have fallen had not the form darted forward, and caught her in his arms. "Oh, Alice! speak and say I have not killed you! I should have known the shock would have been too much!" and in anguish he clasped her to him.

The cries and noise soon brought others to the room, and what a wild confusion followed! Frightened, some fled, and others shrieked and fainted, and still, those who were stronger stood in blank amazement, bound by a spell, for strange and impossible as it seemed, Walter Raymun in flesh and blood had come back from the grave to the living world!

An hour later.

Austen Warne was dying!

He had awakened from the stupor into which his shock and fall had thrown him, in the wild ravings of delirium. An internal injury was fast taking his life away. But with the ebbing out of the tide his reason returned once more.

"Was it he or his spirit I saw?" he asked, faintly. "Walter is alive and well," soon one of the crowd which had gathered around him answered.

"It can't be possible, for I saw him dead!"

"No, Austen Warne, not dead," said Walter, "though you intended it so! But your scheme has failed! They tell me your accomplice, Alex West is no more!"

"Yes, yes!" moaned the stricken man; "and I killed him!"

"You killed him!" repeated the other in amazement.

"Spare me, Walter, for I am dying! It was an accursed plot, but for give me for my treachery and perfidy! When Alex and I had slain you, as we supposed, he prepared to personate you and was successful, for no one detected the difference. But upon seeing her, whom of course taking your place he would marry, I grew jealous, and tired of the deception, for I wanted her myself! I threatened to expose him, when we quarreled, and I shot him through the heart. Then, I intended to reform and be worthy of Alice's love. I did all in my power to win her esteem, and flattered myself I should be successful. But I have not known one moment's true peace since the first! I have been haunted day and night by your face and his! Willingly would I have given my life could I have undone those crimes. But, too late! too late! Now, I am dying! But I have a secret and another sin which I cannot carry to my grave untold. When I rescued Alice from the outlaw I found him before he was dead, and knowing he could not live, he charged me to bear his last message to your father, Arthur Raymun. Wild Kate, as she is called, is his daughter—your sister! I have not told this before, for I feared she would be in the way of

my getting the property, as I hoped to. There, you know all! Oh, how I have sinned and suffered! and how dark the future looks! Can't some of you pray for me?"

While an earnest petition was being offered up to the Power on High for his soul's salvation, the erring man's spirit left its mortal tenement to seek its judgment for the great Eternity.

Walter Raymun had written to his parents that his chum, Austen Warne, would accompany him home from college. After writing, another friend concluded to bear them companionship. This was he called Alex West, who bore a decided resemblance to Walter in looks and appearance. But the true meter of man—the heart—was not the same, or our tale would have ended ere this. The friends proved traitors, and they left him dead, as they supposed, on the way. Still, he lived, and found by a settler where the plotters had done their fiendish work, he was cared for, returning to his home as soon as he was able. Need we tell more? Four years away at that time in life when changes are most manifest, his friends and relatives were not surprised to find him considerably altered from the boy who had left. The heart of our betrothed heroine alone felt the change from the Walter of her troth, and the girl love she had felt for the boy was lost to the man.

That night there was a joyous gathering at Colonel Raymun's. There were glad hearts and smiling countenances. Wild Kate, no longer the lone, despoiled outcast, was now the daughter of fond parents, the happiest of the happy. Well might Hart Clifford be proud of his promised bride.

Walter and Alice, though too much overjoyed in their reunion to mingle in the company, were not forgotten. In fact, it was a scene of praise and rejoicing, and without a speck on the horizon of the future of our sometime friends, the curtain falls.

THE END.

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